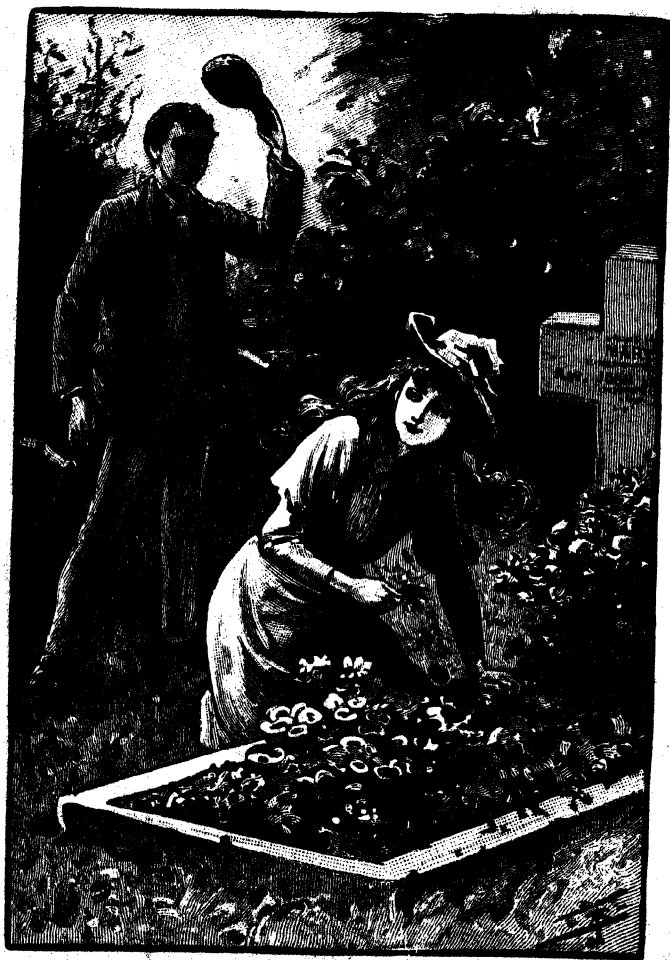


FOR LIGHT AND LIBERTY.



She looked up with a start when she heard his footsteps.

Frontispiece.

Page 100.

FOR LIGHT AND LIBERTY.

By SILAS K. HOCKING, F.R.H.S.,
Author of "Her Bess," "For Abigail," "Real Grit," etc., etc

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FOR LIGHT AND LIBERTY.

CHAPTER I.

PRIORY MERE.

“The day is cold, and dark, and dreary ;
It rains and the wind is never weary ;
The vine still clings to the moulderling wall,
But at every gust the dead leaves fall,
And the day is dark and dreary.”

LONGFELLOW.

PRIORY MERE was not an inviting place, even in the brightest weather ; but seen through the driving rain of an autumn afternoon it looked positively forbidding. The house was old—no one knew how old—and out of repair, the chimney-pots leaned in all directions. On the roof were big patches of moss and house leek, while in front of the drawing-room window, the trellis work—which helped to support an antiquated verandah—was slowly rotting away.

The situation was not unpleasant. Behind the house was an extensive plantation of elms and sycamores ; while in front, the ground sloped gently downwards to a level plain, which was encircled by a deep and slowly-moving river. Beyond the river, and right and left rose wooded hills, which formed a natural amphitheatre, but shut out every glimpse of distant country.

From within the scene was fair enough. It was from without, with the gloomy and decaying house in front, that the picture ceased to charm. Little Eric Strome, looking through the carriage window, as he approached it, shuddered and drew back his head.

“Is that Priory Mere, uncle ?” he asked, timidly, of the man who sat by his side.

“Yes ! What’s amiss with it ?” was the reply.

"Oh, I do not know," the boy answered, with a little quiver of the lip. "Only it looks very dark and cold."

"It's a dark, cold day," was the answer. "See how the rain beats all the while."

"Does it always rain like this here?" the boy asked, after a pause.

The man laughed satirically. "No, boy," he said, "it isn't always raining here. We do get a fine day occasionally."

"Oh, I don't mean that," the boy hastened to explain. "I mean when it rains does it always sweep sideways, as it is doing now? In London, you know, it comes down in drops quite straight."

The man laughed again. "It rains in London as it does in other places," he said, "only where you lived the streets were narrow, and you couldn't see the sweep of the rain for the houses."

"Yes, that would be it," the boy answered, thoughtfully, looking out of the window again. "But what a little bit of a city Priory Mere is."

"It isn't a city at all," said the man; "it is a house."

"And isn't there a street behind?"

"There's nothing behind but a plantation."

"And it's all one house?" said the boy, pushing his head farther out of the window.

"Yes, it's all one house. How many more questions will you ask?"

"I beg your pardon, uncle," the boy answered quickly, coming back to his seat. "I did not mean to be rude."

"Tut, tut, never mind," the man said, as he saw the boy's lips quiver. "You see I'm not used to boys. But here we are at last."

The next moment the carriage stopped, and a middle-aged woman ran out of the house and opened the door.

"Here we are at last, Sarah," the man said, as he stepped quickly out of the carriage. "And here's the boy. I'm afraid you'll have no more peace now for the rest of your life."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that, sir," Sarah answered, dropping a curtesy. "Maybe he'll brighten the place up a bit."

"You think it needs it, do you?"

The woman tittered a little, then said: "You ain't agoin', sir, to get me to say anything agin Priory Mere, though it be a bit quiet an' lonesome. Homer an' me have been very 'appy here ever since we were wed; aint we, Homer?"

"Aye, Sarah, that's true for thee, my gal," said the coachman, struggling with a heavy portmanteau. "And as for the lad, bless him, he's a beauty. Look at him, Sarah."

"Yes, take charge of him," said Philip Hardman, as he walked into the house, "and make him presentable for dinner."

Sarah needed no second bidding, and the next moment the lonely little lad was in the motherly arms of the kind-hearted woman, his face upon her shoulder, his curly head pressed close to her cheek.

Eric's heart had gone out to her directly her face appeared at the carriage door. A homely face it might be, surrounded by a black cap, which was brightened with a few bows of purple ribbon; a face that was innocent of the smallest pretension to beauty, and yet a face that touched the boy's heart to trust in a moment. And, throwing himself into her arms, he let her carry him into the house without a word.

Sarah and Homer had a room of their own, in addition to the kitchen, where they held undisputed sway. For the sake of convenience this was called Homer's room, though, in truth, Homer rarely honoured it with his presence. He preferred the roomy kitchen, with its flagged floor, and oak settle, and polished range and cheerful fire.

"I wern't never brought up to cushions an' carpets," he used to say. "And hobnail'd shoes an' hearthrugs don't match nohow. Give me a good big kitchen that I can have my fling in, and a settle that ain't got no stuffin' to disturb, an' I'm all right,"

And so it came about that Homer's room was appropriated by Homer's wife. Here she made her caps and did her mending, and sometimes of an afternoon, when the weather was warm, took a quiet nap.

It was to this room Eric was conveyed by Sarah, on his arrival at Priory Mere.

"Now, my bonny," she said, placing him on the hearth.

rug, just warm yourself a bit, for dinner will be ready soon."

He did not speak, but from his vantage ground the little fellow slowly surveyed the room, then turtled towards the fire, and stretched out his small hands to the cheerful blaze.

Sarah watched him with a pleased smile upon her homely face. She once had a baby of her own that held her heart in love and fear for three anxious months, and then passed out into the great silence. And ever since her heart had ached for a child to love. And now her master had brought home his orphaned nephew to live with them always. And the woman's heart gave a great bound as she looked at the little fellow standing before the fire. And, rushing forward in a thrill of love and longing, she caught him up in her arms, and kissed him again and again.

"I'm glad you love me, Sarah," he said, with childish candour.

"Love you, honey!" she said. "Who could help loving you?"

"Mamma loved me very much," he said, his lips beginning to quiver again. "And she used to kiss me every night. Will you kiss me, Sarah, when I go to bed?"

"Kiss you, sweetheart?" and she swept her hand swiftly across her eyes. "I should think I will kiss you."

"Then I think I shan't mind being here," he said. "Uncle Philip didn't kiss me, but perhaps it ain't proper for gentlemen to kiss people."

"Well, that depends, honey," Sarah answered gravely, while an amused smile lighted up her homely face.

"Depends on what, Sarah?"

"Well, on age and circumstances, and them things, you know," Sarah replied, trying in vain to keep her face straight.

"Does being old make all the difference?" he questioned.

"Well, it does sometimes, honey," was the answer; "but sit in the easy chair for a minute or two, while I run into the kitchen to see how Peggy is getting on with the dinner."

"Who's Peggy?" he questioned.

"She's the kitchenmaid; but don't fret, I'll be back in a moment or two."

"Oh, I'll not fret," he said, as he walked across to the window, and climbed on a chair to look out. Flattening his nose against the pane, he could look right and left as well as straight in front of him.

The rain was still coming down in drifts, like the spray of a cataract driven before the wind. Just in front of the window was a patch of grass, beyond that an apple orchard, beyond that again the kitchen garden. Then the ground rose steeply, wooded to the top. To the left was a tall thorn hedge, beyond which was the carriage drive leading round to the front of the house; to the right were the coach-house and stables, separated from the kitchen by a wide and well-paved courtyard.

For several seconds Eric watched the rain sweeping across the apple trees and breaking against the wooded hills beyond. It was a strange picture to him, and one that fascinated him greatly. He had lived all his life in a narrow street in a crowded part of London. Their little sitting-room had overlooked a dingy yard of about twelve feet square, beyond the yard was another yard of about the same dimensions, and then the staring back windows of the opposite house, greeted their vision. To the front was the little shop, out of which his mother had eked a living for herself and him, and beyond the shop the crowded street, with its hurry and skurry and noise all day long.

How different was all this from what he now saw before him! The change was so great that he could not realise it yet. He seemed to have got into a new world—a world that had not the least resemblance to the old. He had lived in a world of bricks and mortar—a world man-made, and crowded with human beings. Now he was face to face with nature. There wasn't a soul to be seen anywhere, nor a sound to be heard, save the low moan of the wind and the patter of the raindrops on the yellow leaves below.

The child hardly knew whether he was pleased or frightened. The stillness was so solemn and yet so restful after the everlasting din of the streets. The sweep and curve of wood and hill were so much more beautiful than the ugly straight lines of brick and stone. The patch of green below the window was so much more restful to the eyes than the dingy yard of his London home. But for all that, this was not home to him yet, and the strange

solemn aspect of nature rather appalled him than anything

He turned away his eyes from the orchard and the hills at length, and fixed them on Homer, who had just emerged from the stable, encased in macintosh and leggings.

The sight of Homer was quite a relief to him. There was some other living thing than himself about. He was not quite alone. Raising his chubby hand, he tapped with his nails against the window pane. But Homer was too busy to heed him, even if he heard, which was not at all likely. He was anxious to clean the carriage before it got dark, and so was bustling about with more than usual alacrity.

Eric was soon quite interested in Homer's work, particularly when the latter placed a simple lever under the axle, and raised one of the carriage wheels from the ground, and began with his hand to turn it round and round.

"Oh, what fun," the child said to himself as the wheel spun faster and faster; and when at length—the wheel spinning like a top—Homer caught up a bucket of water and splashed full on it, Eric clapped his hands and shouted in childish enthusiasm.

"What is it, honey?" Sarah asked, coming back at that moment into the room.

"Come and look," he answered, without turning round, "it is such fun."

"Do you call that fun, darling?" she questioned as she came and stood by his side. "I reckon Homer don't call it fun."

"Is he doing it to please me, Sarah?"

"Now who knows?" she said, looking suddenly grave.

"Anyhow, honey, Homer'll always be glad to please you."

"Will he?"

"That he will. There never was a kinder soul in the world, though it's me as says it who shouldn't."

"Why shouldn't you say it, Sarah?"

"Well, you see, he is my husband, lovey," Sarah answered, in some confusion.

"And oughtn't folks to tell what is true about their husbands?"

"Oh, bless your little prattling tongue," Sarah an-

swered, taking the lad in her arms and kissing him. "But come away with me ; I must get you ready for dinner."

"But you haven't told me, Sarah."

"Well, never mind," she answered, as she led the way into the hall, and then up a winding staircase ; "I haven't time to answer any more questions now."

"Well, this is a funny house," the boy said, as he paused on the stairs and looked up into the dome skylight.

"Yes, it's funny enough," Sarah answered, quickly ; "but we've no time to waste now. Wait till to-morrow ; you'll have plenty of time then."

So without another word he followed her along a narrow passage, and into a large and well-lighted room. That is, it was well lighted in the day time, for the window was large and faced the south ; but just now the dark October day was dying swiftly over the hills, and the sombre shadows of the coming night obscured everything.

"This is to be your room, honey," Sarah said, as she raised the blind a little. "It's next to ours, an' I don't think you'll be lonely. It's playroom and bedroom in one. You've only to pull that bell, close by your bed, and Homer or me will be with you in a minute. And when the weather gets cold you shall have a fire ; so I expect you will have rare times of it here."

"Do you think so, Sarah?" he said, looking timidly round the large and sparsely-furnished room.

"Of course I think so," she answered, cheerfully. But the thought of being alone in this great room through all the long and dreary night was not an inviting prospect to the child. At home in London he had slept in a narrow bed next his mother's, and when he lay awake sometimes he could hear her breathing by his side, or sometimes she was awake also and spoke to him, and that reassured him, and he would fall asleep again. But here there would be no one to speak to him, and not even a glimmer of gas-light to cheer the darkness.

"Now, don't you go worrying," Sarah said, as she noticed the troubled look on the lad's face. "You'll be as bright as a new penny here, never fear."

And for answer he gave her a winsome smile, and then commenced the operation of dressing for dinner.

CHAPTER II.

A WOULD-BE PHILOSOPHER.

“A fugitive from heaven and prayer,
He mocked at all religious fear,
Deep-scienc'd in the mazy lore
Of mad philosophy.”

HORACE.

MEANWHILE Philip Hardman was standing at his library window with a look of irritation and impatience upon his face. He was not a cheerful man at the best of times. His view of life was pessimistic in the extreme. His pursuits had never been of an exhilarating character; his surroundings were painfully depressing. Had he been differently circumstanced; had he lived with cheerful people, instead of with his gloomy self; had he even kept his home bright and in good repair, instead of allowing it to fall into decay, he might have been a different man. As it was, however, the two great factors—heredity and environment—which make or mar the lives of so many men, had both conspired against him. He was like the fabled pipkin between the iron pots. If nature had ever endowed him with any glimmer of faith or hope, circumstances had crushed it out. Life had no beauty for him, and death no promise of future being.

Yet he was not without his little vanities and conceits. He was not indifferent to the opinions of others. He liked to pose as a student and philosopher; and would occasionally interlard his conversation with quotations from Hegel and Berkeley and Kant. For many years past he had affected antiquarian tastes, and had turned half his library space into a museum.

Occasionally whispers reached his ears that he was regarded by the outside world—or such of the outside

world as knew of his existence—as a kind of modern Diogenes, who found no pleasure in the ordinary ways of men, and who chose, therefore, to spend his time in occult studies, and in secret and subtle attempts to solve the mysteries of life.

Whispers of this kind always pleased him greatly. He knew well enough that he was but the veriest dabbler in science and philosophy—that he had no real knowledge of the one or the other. Yet to be even thought a student was some consolation, and he did his best to maintain the reputation he had thus unwittingly won.

When occasionally he was thrown into the company of the local antiquarians he always distinguished himself by his profound reserve. And in his case silence was much more eloquent than speech. Had he talked much, he would have betrayed his shallowness. By keeping still and looking wise, he sometimes made a great impression.

In this respect his appearance helped him greatly. He was tall and thin, with a stoop in his shoulders, and a carelessness in his dress that betokened a mind above such a commonplace matter as clothes. He wore his hair long, and never went into company without a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles sitting securely astride his nose. Hence it is scarcely to be wondered at that Philip Hardman was regarded by the rank-and-file of his acquaintance as no ordinary man.

An ordinary man would have repaired his residence and made it habitable, would have taken to himself a wife and entertained his neighbours, would have ridden after the hounds, and taken an interest in local and imperial politics. But since Philip Hardman did none of these things, since he chose to live the life of a hermit, and spend his time in experimenting with the forces of Nature, the conclusion was inevitable, and the owner of Priory Mere rejoiced in it.

The only people who saw the man as he really was were Homer Brent and his wife. But Homer was a cautious man, and kept his tongue still. Moreover, he was very fond of his master, and broadly tolerant of his weaknesses. He could not be blind to his little vanities and conceits, and shrewdly suspected that his apparent devotion to science and philosophy was the merest pretence. Still it was no business of his to interfere or pass judgment on the conduct

of another. His duty was to be a faithful servant, and this he honestly tried to be, and now, after twenty years of service at Priory Mere, his master knew that he possessed a treasure, while Homer regarded himself as a permanent institution.

But time inevitably brings change, and even Priory Mere was not to escape. The quiet of twenty years was to be broken in upon at last. A child had come to take up his residence among them. But neither Homer, nor Homer's master, nor Homer's wife ever guessed how great a difference one little life would make. Homer regarded the advent of the boy with unalloyed delight. No child with a new toy could be more intensely excited or pleased. He had a passionate love for all young things, but especially for children. And the first glimpse he got of Eric's face touched all the springs of his sympathetic nature, and his heart went out to the child in a moment.

"He's a regular beauty," he said to himself, and he kept repeating it all the way home from the station. And now, as he stood in the open yard in the driving rain, washing the mud from the carriage wheels, his reflections ran in the same groove.

"Bless 'im, he'll be like a bit of sunshine in this wintry old house," he said to himself. "He'll warm us up an' wacken us into life again," and he swished a bucket of water on the spinning wheel with redoubled energy.

"Bless my soul, to hear a young thing like that laugh in this gloomy old sepulchre, will drive all the ghostes away, an' stir up the hearts of us old fogies like music. That it will, as sure's my name is 'Omer Brent."

And Homer went to the trough and filled his bucket again.

"We be all of us agettin' old afore our time," he said, straightening himself, and looking critically at the carriage wheel. "Here I be just forty-five, and, bless my heart, I feel sixty sometimes. And there's the master, not as old as me by four or five years, and stooping like Methuselah. It ain't natural, it ain't; an' it's all because we've never had no young folks about us."

And Homer caught up the bucket and walked round to the other side of the carriage.

"Bless my soul, I believe it's Providence," he went on,

laying down the bucket again, "I do, for sure. It ain't right we should all be allowed to go to decay together in this way. And as for the master, he's growing into a regular hermit, and has lost faith in everything. He neither cares for this world or the world to come. I do hope the boy will wake him up to better things, I do, I do."

And with this charitable reflection, Homer settled himself to his work again. Yet, had he seen his master at that moment, he would probably have been less hopeful than he appeared to be.

Philip Hardman—as we have before stated—was standing at his library-window looking out upon the sodden landscape and driving rain. He was tired with his long journey from London, and impatient for his dinner. Moreover, the new responsibility he had assumed hung over him like a nightmare, and made him more than usually peevish.

"Beastly world this," he muttered, thrusting his thumbs into his vest pockets and scowling at the drifting rain. "Voltaire was quite right, and 'Candide' is a clever exposition and illustration of the fact. People won't think nowadays, they are just content to drift on the tide of superstition. Bah! what a world this is," and he shrugged his shoulders, and scowled more darkly than before.

"As for that old Sam Johnson," he muttered, "he was simply an idiot, and his 'Rasselas' the silliest thing ever penned. School-house for eternity, eh? A lot he knew about it. And, even if it were so, what a beastly schoolhouse it is!"

With this reflection he turned away from the window and walked towards the fire. He did not attempt to take a seat, however. Leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece he scowled at the fire as he had done at the rain.

"As for that boy," he went on, "I expect he will be the plague of my life. As sure as he's a boy he'll upset my cases, and meddle with my books, and disarrange my papers, and work no end of mischief. Boys always do. They're all alike. And yet I shall have to keep him, whether I like it or no."

And he started on a walk round the room.

"Here's the firstfruits of his advent," he continued, "in a late dinner. Sarah will lose her head over the brat;

that is a foregone conclusion, and I shall have to pay the penalty. But there! women are all alike. The boy's mother was as perverse as she could be. She would persist in marrying that George Strome, whom nobody knew anything about, and nobody could persuade her out of it. Oh, dear, what an idiotic world this is!"

And he took two or three rapid turns round the room by way of easing his overwrought feelings.

"Nothing ever goes right on this insane planet," he went on. "My sister Jane marries a man whom nobody knows, and, two years later, she gets word that he has died suddenly in New York, whither he had gone on business. I suppose the fellow did die, for nobody has heard of him since. And now Jane herself must take it into her head to follow suit and leave her boy to me. It really is too bad. I really don't know why I should be troubled with the brat; he's nothing to me. True, I am his mother's brother; but we were almost strangers to each other. Uncle Peter adopted me when I was only ten, and I've lived here ever since. Jane was't born then, and I've scarcely seen her twenty times in the last twenty years. It really is a piece of bitter injustice." And he uttered an expletive which we will not record, then marched up to the bell and pulled it violently.

In a moment Peggy appeared at the door.

"Yes, sir. Did you want anything, sir?" she began, before her master had time to speak.

"Want anything. Of course I do. I want my dinner. Am I to be kept fasting all day?"

"It's all ready for dishing up, sir. But Sarah is busy with Master Eric, sir."

"Go and tell Sarah to attend to me, will you?"

"Yes, sir; but it will be on the table in a minute, sir." And Peggy rushed away with unusual alacrity.

A few minutes later the gong sounded, and Philip Hardman marched impatiently into the dining-room. Here he found Sarah and Eric awaiting his arrival. Without noticing either, he took his seat at the head of the table, and began to crumble a piece of dry toast into his soup.

Eric looked at him timidly from his high seat far down the table, and then began to copy his example. His long journey and long fast had given him an appetite, and

though the dinner arrangements seemed to him very stiff and formal, he was too hungry to be critical, and too eager to get on with the meal to notice his uncle's silence. Sarah, with tender solicitude, took care that his plate should be well supplied, and while the kind-hearted woman was near him he had no fear.

When, however, she took her departure he began to feel uncomfortable. His uncle preserved the same dogged silence, and so far had not condescended to notice him at all. Eric was too young to feel hurt at this seeming indifference, though not too young to feel the want of human sympathy. The silence grew unbearable after a while, so he slipped off his chair, and walked up and touched his uncle timidly on the arm.

"Well, boy, what now?" And Philip Hardman went on paring his apple without turning his head.

"Ain't you well, uncle?" the child asked, timidly.

"Yes, I'm well enough. Why?"

"Mother was always poorly when she was so quiet, so I thought you might be poorly."

"You see, I'm not your mother," was the cold reply.

"No; if mother had only lived I shouldn't have troubled you, should I?" and the child's lip trembled as he spoke.

"Who said anything about trouble?" he questioned, shortly.

"Mother used to say that she wanted to live, so that I might not be a trouble to you."

"I wish she had lived, boy," was the abrupt answer.

"Sarah said just now she was better off," he replied, his eyes filling.

"Yes, she's better off. All the dead are better off. But has Sarah begun to cram you with her cant and nonsense already? I must put a stop to that."

"Sarah has been very kind to me, uncle," he answered, timidly, a great fear creeping into his heart at the same moment that he had said something which he should have left unsaid.

"Oh, I daresay—I daresay," he answered, shortly.

"She's kind enough, but stuffed full of superstition and nonsense, and I'm not going to let her spoil you with it."

This answer was altogether beyond Eric's comprehension, so he discreetly kept silence for awhile.

A little later he found himself in the library listening, with a feeling akin to dismay, to a long and serious discourse by his uncle. He tried his best to comprehend what it all meant, but could only understand a word or two here and there. He was very grateful when Sarah came at length to take him to bed. He was tired and heartsore, and longed to hide himself somewhere out of sight. Sarah turned back again after she had left the room to have another look at the lonely little figure outlined under the white counterpane.

She found him crying softly to himself, with his face buried in the clothes.

"What's the matter, honey?" she whispered, kindly. "Is there anything Sarah can do?"

"No thank you, Sarah," he sobbed. "I'm crying for mother. Oh, I do want her very much."

"My poor little bairn," Sarah answered, while a great lump came into her throat, and she bent down and kissed him.

"I'm not afraid of being alone, Sarah," he sobbed, after awhile. "Only you may come in and kiss me again before you go to bed."

"That I will, sweetheart," she answered. "There, now, don't cry any more, and I will draw the blind and let more light into the room. See, the rain has blown over, and the stars are shining in the sky. Now, honey, don't fret," and she came back and kissed him again, then quietly left the room.

After awhile he turned his head so that he could look out of the window. It seemed so strange to see the stars looking in upon him. In London the stars never looked through his window; the opposite houses blocked the view. But here they twinkled in such a kindly way. They seemed to him like eyes of love and friendship. He couldn't be lonely with such tender eyes beaming in upon him through all the quiet night.

An hour later, when Sarah stole into the room, he was quietly asleep, with a beautiful smile upon his parted lips.

"Bless him," she whispered; "perhaps the stars have comforted him," and then stole silently out, and closed the door.

CHAPTER III.

PERPLEXITY.

"You brag, methinks, somewhat too much of late
Of your lamp-lit philosophy. One bite
Of a mad cat (no more than kills a tailor)
Will put an end to 't and your dreams together."

BARRY CORNWALL.

PHILIP HARDMAN sat up late that night, wrapped in meditation. The chance remark of Eric's that "Sarah had said his mother was better off," had set him thinking, and his thinking had led to perplexity. He had resolved—since he had taken charge of the boy—to educate him on certain very definite lines, which his own judgment approved; and here, within an hour of the lad's arrival, his plans were being forestalled, and practically upset.

"It really is most annoying," he said to himself, as he frowned steadily at the fire. "Most annoying. Give that woman a week's start, and she'll cram the boy with notions and nonsense that will take a lifetime to eradicate. But she must not have the week's start, that's the only way out of the difficulty. I must settle the matter first thing to-morrow morning—that is, if I can settle it," he added, after a pause. And he took up the poker, and thrust it through a lump of coal that was smouldering in the grate.

"I foresee difficulties," he went on, knitting his brows. "The woman is tenacious of her opinions, and so is Homer, for that matter. And I expect they will both think it their conscientious duty to push their silly creed down the boy's throat. That is the worst of these religious people, they are so fanatical. They always think they are under penalty of eternal torment if they don't try to convert every one else to their views."

And Philip Hardman lay back in his chair, and laughed softly and contemptuously.

"The silly fools," he went on, with an expression of scorn on his thin lips. "But then most people are fools," and he laughed again.

"It is only the cultured few, the men of thought and research, who have risen above these superstitions, and reached the clear light of truth," and he rubbed his hands complacently, while a smile of self-satisfaction played over his face.

But the smile soon vanished and settled once more into a frown.

"I should be sorry to lose them," he went on, after a pause. "They are good servants. I should never be as well suited again. Notwithstanding their canting Methodism, they are perfectly trustworthy, and that's everything to a man of my tastes. But if they persist, under any mistaken sense of duty, in thrusting their religious notions down the throat of the boy—well, we shall have to part, that is all about it."

And he thrust out his feet on the fender, and pushed his hands deep into his trousers pockets.

"I intend to educate that boy on strictly original lines," he continued. "He shall grow up without bias. By the time he is fifteen, he shall know as much about Buddhism, and Mohamedanism, and Mormonism as he does about Christism, and if, when he gets to be a man, he wants a religion of any sort, he shall select his own. I hope he will be able to rise above all these superstitions into the clear light of intellect. But if he does not, it shall not be my fault."

And with this reflection he rose to his feet, and turned his back to the fire. It was well on to midnight now, and the night was perfectly still, save for an occasional moan of autumn wind in the trees outside. For a moment or two he glanced uneasily round the room, then his eyes rested on a picture on the opposite wall.

It was the portrait of a young girl with auburn hair, red pouting lips, and laughing blue eyes. A sweet trusting face it was, indicating gentleness and good temper, rather than strength of intellect or will.

For several minutes he looked at the portrait without moving; then, heaving a sigh, he turned away his head.

"Ah, me," he said, at length; "if Mary had been true

to me the world might have seemed different. But a plain man had no chance against a clean face, a white necktie, and an oily tongue. Well, well, it doesn't matter. A few years, and all is over. She has gone to dust or melted into the infinite azure; and it's really silly to worry about anything in an idiotic world like this. I wonder if it wouldn't be the truest philosophy to let the boy alone, and permit Homer and Sarah to teach him what they like. What, after all, does it matter? In a hundred years from now it will be all the same. We shall all be wrapped in eternal silence."

And he raised his head to listen to the low moan of wind that stole up from the river, and lingered for a few moments among the tall elm trees, then died slowly away in the distance. But that low breath of autumn wind touched a memory that echoed through his brain, and even reached his lips.

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

"Bah!" he said, moving hastily away from the fire. "How these old superstitions haunt one. No, I will be true to myself in this matter. Trouble or no trouble, I will carry out my plans respecting the boy." And hastily lighting his candle and extinguishing the lamp, he marched off to bed.

When he got down next morning the sun was shining brilliantly. There had been a thick fog in the early morning, Homer explained, but the great orb of day had scattered it right and left, and was now shining in an almost cloudless sky.

Homer was in the garden when his master joined him, raking up the fallen leaves from the flower beds. For awhile Philip Hardman watched him in silence, hardly knowing how to open the conversation.

Homer, however, came to his rescue. "If you want a buttonhole, master," he said, "there's one or two late roses left, and very pretty ones, too."

"No, thank you, Homer," was the reply. "I want a little talk with you this morning on something more serious than buttonholes."

Homer at once straightened himself and looked at his master, but did not reply.

"I want to have a talk about Master Eric," Philip Hardman went on. "The boy will necessarily be a great deal with you and Sarah, and I am very anxious that you should not upset any of my plans."

"I'm not aware that we've any wish to do so," Homer replied, with becoming deference.

"Perhaps not, and yet, unless I warn you, you will do so all the same."

"I don't think I quite understand," Homer said, shifting himself uneasily.

"Well, then, I will try to enlighten you. You and Sarah are crammed full of silly rubbish which you call religion. Now with this religion of yours—which I hold in utter contempt—I have never interfered, nor do I intend to interfere while you keep it to yourselves. But if I find you make any attempt to stuff the boy with it there will be trouble."

"And do you intend the boy to grow up a heathen?" said Homer, with a flash of indignation in his eyes.

"I intend him to grow up free from cant and superstition," was the cold reply.

"And you will teach him nothing about God or sin or the world to come?" questioned Homer.

Philip Hardman laughed contemptuously.

"God and sin and the other world," he said, in tones of scorn. "What do you know about either?"

"About sin I know too much," said Homer, seriously; "about God I know too little. Yet I know that He is, an' that He loves me."

"You know that He is? And how, I pray?" Philip Hardman asked, with a curl of his lip. "Give me proof, Homer."

"Ah, master," said Homer, "there are many things we know which we can't prove."

"Indeed," with lofty condescension; "give an example."

Homer slowly stooped, and plucked one of the roses he had spoken of.

"That rose, master, is beautiful," he said, holding it up.

"Yes, no doubt it is a very beautiful flower," his master said, taking it from his hand.

"Can you prove it's beautiful, sir?" Homer asked, quietly.

"Prove it? It requires no proof. It's its own proof."

"Just so. That's what God is," Homer said, with brightening eyes.

Philip Hardman scowled.

"Homer," he said, "you cannot reason. You've never studied logic. I fear I'm only wasting my time with you."

Homer coloured slightly, then answered, with dignity, "I know I'm no scholar, sir. An' maybe I can't argify on right lines, but I can think an' feel; an' just as that rose answers to somethin' within me which tells me it is beautiful, so God answers to somethin' within, and I know He is, and I know He loves me."

"Oh, this is silly sentiment," said Philip Hardman, impatiently. "So let us get back to the question at issue. The boy has only one life to live; and it is my wish that that life shall not be haunted by superstitious fears or vexed by any belief in a future life."

"But if there is a future life," said Homer, "not believin' in it won't alter the fact."

"The question does not admit of an 'if,'" was the reply. "There *is* no future life."

"Are you sure?" questioned Homer.

"Of course I am sure," was the answer.

"But how?" Homer insisted.

"Science can find no proof of a future life, nor even a presumption of it," said Hardman, impatiently; "while philosophy utterly discredits the supposition."

"I reckon, sir," said Homer, with a twinkle in his eye, "that science can't find no proof of lots o' things. But they exist all the same."

"Indeed," said Hardman.

"Yes, sir," said Homer, doggedly. "I don't think science can find out how that rose grew, nor how it got the colour on its leaves, nor the perfume hidden away down in its heart."

"Indeed," Hardman said again, compressing his thin lips.

"No, sir; an' I don't think as how science can tell how a chicken grows out of a egg; or a oak out of an acorn, an' if science can't prove there's any future life I don't think nothin' of that. Science ain't never been axed to prove it, as fur as I know."

"How learnedly you talk, Homer," said his mastor, with ineffable scorn. "Do you know what life is?"

"No, sir," said Homer, colouring; "I can't say as I do."

"Then let me explain. Life is consciousness. You are conscious, therefore you are. Do you see that?"

"No, sir," said Homer, scratching his head. "I should put it the other way about, and say, I *be*, therefore I'm conscious."

Philip Hardman plucked at the rose he held in his hand impatiently. He felt that this quiet unlettered man was more than a match for him. Evidently he had not attended his chapel for nothing, or read, without grasping the thought of the books.

When he replied again he did so in less arrogant tones.

"Look here, Homer," he said. "I know you are an intelligent man, and a well-read man for your station. But you are like all imperfectly educated men—illogical."

"Very likely," said Homer, mildly.

"And what I wanted to point out is this," he went on, "that life is consciousness; consciousness is sensation; sensation is caused by the action of the nerves; and the nerves, we know, are matter. Hence, you see, we reduce everything to matter."

"I see you do," said Homer.

"Very good," was the reply. "You destroy the nerves, you destroy sensation; so ends consciousness, so terminates life. When a man dies, therefore, that is the end of him."

"But five minutes after a man is dead," said Homer, "his nerves are in him all right, ain't they?"

"Yes, of course; but they have ceased to respond."

"Respond to what?" Homer questioned.

"To impressions, of course."

"And why have they ceased to respond to impressions?" said Homer.

"My man, it is always easy to ask questions," Hard-

man replied, patronisingly. "But I must tell you, you are getting altogether beyond your depth."

"I reckon we both be," said Homer, with a laugh. "But I hope you won't think me rude when I say your argument don't seem very convincing. Admitting that the future be wrapped in dark mystery, one thing seems clear to me."

"And what is that, Homer?"

"Well, sir, it is this. There was a time when I was nothin'. And I, who was nothin', began to be, and am livin' still, and so it don't seem anything like so strange that I shall continue to be now that I am, as that once bein' nothing I came to be at all."

"What a profound argument, Homer," said Philip Hardman, with a smile.

"No, sir, it may not be profound," said Homer, "but there's reason it, and I shall hold on to the old hope still."

"You can hold on to anything you like, so long as you let the boy alone."

"And suppose, sir, I feel it my conscientious duty to teach the young master the truths of the Gospel?"

"I shall feel it my conscientious duty to dismiss you on the first discovery of such a thing."

"That's rather hard, sir."

"Not hard at all, since I have given you fair warning."

"But I have convictions, sir."

"And so have I. Moreover, I believe your Bible teaches you that servants should be obedient to their masters."

"Yes, sir, that is so, an' I have always tried to do my duty."

"You have. I think very highly of both you and your wife, and I should be sorry indeed to part with you; but on this question I am determined. The boy shall not be badgered with creeds and dogmas. I want the little animal to live his life as happily as he can in this idiotic world. He'll have troubles enough, as he will find out to his cost, but to pen him up in a hell of superstition I will not tolerate."

"I am very sorry to hear you talk in that way, sir," Homer said, with a little shake in his voice. "God knows I would only make the little chap happy—happy now and happy hereafter; but if you say we must not speak to him

on such matters—well, I suppose we must obey or leave. Anyhow, I will talk the matter over with Sarah.”

“Yes, do so, and that will save me the trouble. It is because Sarah began stuffing the lad with her nonsense last evening that I have spoken to you so early this morning. I hope now we shall not need to refer to the matter again.” Saying which Philip Hardman turned on his heel and walked away.

CHAPTER IV.

A QUEER WORLD.

"It's wiser being good than bad ;
It's safer being meek than fierce ;
It's fitter being sane than mad.
My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched ;
That, after Last, returns the First,
Though a wide compass round be fetched ;
That what began best can't end worst,
Nor what God blessed once prove accurst."

BROWNING.

It cannot be said that Homer threw much enthusiasm into his work during the rest of that morning. He tried his best to fix his mind on the duties he had set himself, but the effort was a very unsatisfactory one. All unconsciously he found his thoughts straying back to the conversation he had held with his master, and to the probable issues of their confabulation ; and the more seriously he thought the more listless grew his hands.

At length he threw down his rake in disgust, and walked away in the direction of the lawn.

"It ain't no use," he muttered to himself. "I feel lazy in every bone I've got ;" and he drew himself up in front of the drawing-room window, and contemplated for a few seconds the broken trellis-work and the rotten verandah.

"Homer, my boy," he grunted at length, "you ain't got no right to be lazy in a place like this ; no sort of right whatsoever. The whole blessed menagerie is a goin' to ruin. I expect some fine mornin' we shall awake and find the old place 'as tumbled in about our ears and we're all dead and buried." And he moved three or four steps nearer the front door.

"Any road," he continued, "it ain't my fault. I can't

do everything on a place like this. If I had nothing but the horse and carriage and harness to look after it 'ud keep me pretty busy; but to clean the windows, an' do the gardenin' besides, and be general factotum, it ain't to be done by any one man." And he struck off in the direction of the kitchen garden.

"I'm sorely boggled," he mused; "I be for sure. To let a rose-tree run to waste 'ud be almost a sin, but to let a boy like that, with his bonny bright eyes an' lips as sweet as a girl's, grow up a heathen, knowing nothin' about the better life nor the way to get to it, is desperate wicked, it seems to me. I don't know if I ought to stay here an' have my tongue tied in this way. What will the Lord say to me in the Day of Judgment if I play the coward after this fashion?"

And Homer pulled off his hat, and began very vigorously to scratch the back of his head—a sure sign that he was more than usually perplexed.

"But s'pose we go away," he went on, after a pause. "I don't see 'ow that'll mend matters. I'd like to stay and look after the lad, I would for sure. An' as for Sarah, she's fairly set her heart upon the boy, and it'll be a terrible trial to her if she has to go. And it'll be nearly as big a trial not to be allowed to teach him to sing 'Gentle Jesus,' an' all the other hymns she loves so much. Oh, dear! oh, dear!" he said, quite loudly; "it's a queer world, a very queer world."

"What makes it queer?" said a childish voice close to his side.

Homer fairly jumped. He had no idea that any one was near him, no idea that he had been thinking aloud.

"Why, Master Eric," he said, at length, "where on airth did you spring from?"

"I saw you through the window of Sarah's room," he said, brightly, "and I asked Sarah to let me come to you, and she did."

"Well, that was good of her," he said, with a broad smile.

"Yes, Sarah's very good," was the childish answer; "but what makes the world so queer, Homer?"

"Well, I guess it's the foaks as be in it," Homer said, looking very grave.

"Are you queer, Homer?" he asked, looking into the man's face with childish candour.

"Queer? I should think I be queer. Why, lad, I don't believe I've a straight line in me anywhere. I'm always rushin' off at a tandem, as they say. You ain't got no idea how queer I be."

"I know you've got a very queer name."

Homer drew himself up with a frown, then burst into a loud laugh.

"Yes," he said, after a pause, "that's only another proof that this is a queer world. My mother meant me to be a great poet, so I've heard her say; but, poor thing, she died without the sight."

"What a pity," said Eric, quite seriously.

"Well, I don't know," Homer answered, making a desperate effort to keep his face straight. "If she had seen me a great poet the sight might ha' been too much for her. And so, may be, things is best as they are."

"Are things always best as they are?" Eric asked, after a long pause.

"Well, as for that, it's hard to say," Homer answered. "It don't look so sometimes. But the Lor——" then he checked himself. He was going to say, "the Lord knows best"; but remembering his master's words he shut his teeth firmly and walked away.

When Eric got up to him he was busy digging up wall-flowers for the purpose of transplanting them.

"What are these things?" the lad asked.

"Wall-flowers," Homer answered, doggedly.

"And why do you dig them up?"

"To plant 'em again in a better place, a place where they will grow better and bloom beautiful in the spring. That's a parable, Master Eric, you don't understand it now, but may be you will some day."

Eric looked at him and wondered at the grave look that had settled upon his face, but he did not speak again for awhile.

When Homer had filled his barrow with plants he wheeled them away in the direction of the drive. Eric watched him till he had turned the corner of the house, then slowly followed him.

It was a new experience to the lad to be out in the quiet

country on this dreamy October morning. Hitherto his world had been bounded by straight lines of grimy walls, but now all the earth seemed to be thrown open to his gaze.

For awhile he watched in silence Homer placing the green plants in a straight line along the edge of the drive, but getting tired at length of its monotony, he started off on an exploring expedition on his own account. Everything was so new and strange, that he was eager for a closer examination. He wondered what was hidden away in the gloomy heart of the plantation, and what lay beyond the circuit of the hills. Below the silent river was flowing stealthily onward. Whence had it come? he wondered, and whither was it going? Would it be possible, he questioned, to find the cistern out of which it flowed? He thought it must be a tremendously big cistern, and he wondered it did not get empty. And then, what was it flowing into? Perhaps Homer would be able to explain these things to him, but Homer was busy now, and so he would have to wait until he had more leisure.

He reached the river at length, and stood for some time on its sloping bank, looking down into its clear, still depths. He had never seen a river like this before. He had seen the Thames once or twice below London Bridge, crowded with boats and barges of all descriptions. But a river like this, so broad, and deep, and clear, flowing peacefully onwards between banks of grass and woodland, with here and there a wagtail skimming swiftly across its placid surface, and dipping its bright wings into its stillness, made up a picture such as he had never seen before. He could have clapped his hands and shouted for very delight, and probably he would have done so, only just then the soft dreamy plash of falling water fell on his ears.

Eric lifted his head and listened. Downward from the wooded hills, from out of which the river seemed to come, the music of the waters was borne on the still October air.

"Oh, the cistern is up there," he said, clapping his hands. And away he started along the river's bank in the direction of the wooded uplands. He did not heed the long grass, still drenched with the morning's mist; he did not mind the brambles that caught and tore his clothes. He leaped with childish glee the trickling rivulets that here

and there crossed his path ere they joined the brimming river, and climbed the fences that threatened to block his way with an enthusiasm that would not be quenched, and still as he went the noise of falling water grew louder and louder.

At length he stood still and clapped his hands in childish glee. He had rounded the hill, and there, in front of him, was a tumbling mass of foaming water—leaping, swirling, recoiling, laughing, hiding, poisoning, and then sinking away into quiet sedateness under the shadow of the overhanging trees.

"Now I shall find the cistern," he said to himself. "A climb up the steep bank and I am there."

Meanwhile noon had arrived, and Sarah had gone out into the garden to fetch her husband into dinner. She and Homer and Peggy always dined at noon. This allowed time to get their master's luncheon punctually at half-past one.

Homer was leaning on his spade staring into vacancy when Sarah reached him. His thoughts were still on the problem set him by his master. Somehow he could not resist the conviction that to let the lad grow up a heathen would be on his part disloyalty to Christ, and yet to go away and leave him to the tender mercies of unknown people seemed a greater wrong still.

"Why, 'Omer, what is the matter with you?" Sarah said, coming up softly and touching him on the elbow; "you look as if you'd buried your last friend."

Homer started, then smiled. "There's one Friend, my lass, we shall never bury," he said, quietly.

"Aye, 'Omer, when all else fails He'll be with us."

"And because of that, Sarah, it seems a cowardly thing not to be true to Him."

"An' who wants to be anything else?" Sarah asked, in a tone of surprise.

"Well, it's this way——" and then Homer stopped.

"Well, Homer?" Sarah questioned at length.

"It's a queer world," Homer grunted.

"So I've heard you say lots of times afore. But what's i' the wind? What are 'e a-drivin' at?"

"It's a longish story," Homer answered, after a considerable pause; "but let's go to dinner and I'll tell thee

on the road." And the two walked away slowly together in the direction of the house.

Sarah listened in silence while Homer narrated the conversation he had had with his master. She was not altogether surprised. She knew of Philip Hardman's professed hatred of all forms of religion. She knew, too, how dogged and determined he could be when he liked, and so was not altogether unprepared for the recital.

"It can't be helped, 'Omer," she said, when he had finished. "And maybe we can preach better by our actions than by our words."

"Aye; but it's hard to keep silence always," Homer answered.

"I know it 'Omer," was the reply. "But though the master may shut our lips, he can't shut our hearts, nor stop our hands from ministerin' to the boy—bless him."

"Aye, bless him," said Homer; "it does one good to look into his purty eyes."

"Eh, that it does," Sarah answered. "But where is he, Homer? I'd almost forgotten him."

"Ain't he in the house?" Homer asked.

"Nay," she said. "I've not seen him since he went out to you in the garden."

"Not seen him since? Did he not come in again when he left me?" he asked, with a touch of anxiety in his voice.

"Nay," she said. "I thought he was with you all the while."

"Oh, no," he answered, with a troubled look; "he left me ever so long ago. I didn't see 'im go away, I wasn't noticin'. I only found out after awhile that he wasn't with me. An' so I thought he had gone back into the house."

It was now Sarah's turn to look alarmed.

"I hope he's not gone an' lost himself," she said, uneasily. "He ain't used to the country, you know, and if he got into the woods he might never find his way out again. Oh, dear, we must look for him at once, 'Omer. We need say nothin' to the master about it unless we are not able to find him by lunch time. But I hope he'll turn up afore then."

"I hope so, indeed," Homer said, apprehensively. "But you search the garden, Sarah, an' I'll overhaul the stable

and outhouses. He may have got into the straw somewhere and fallen asleep."

A quarter of an hour later they met again in the courtyard.

"You've not seen 'im?" Sarah questioned.

"No," Homer said, with a shake of his head; "he's nowhere 'ereabouts."

"He's gone off into the woods or down by the river, you may depend," she said. "You be off into the plantation, 'Omer, an' I'll go down by the river, but be sure you're back again by half-past one."

But by half-past one their search had proved unavailing. Homer had scoured the plantation at the back of the house in all directions, while his wife had gone up the river and down the river, and scanned the countryside near and far, but neither sight nor sign of the lad had greeted their vision.

Lunch was a quarter of an hour late that day, and during that fifteen minutes what small stock of patience Philip Hardman possessed had all evaporated.

"When will you learn to be punctual, Sarah?" he said, as he came frowning into the dining-room.

"I've been searching for Master Eric," she said, looking very white and scared.

"Just as I said it would be," he grumbled. "He's not been here twenty-four hours and, by Jove, he's upset everything."

"You've not seen 'im anywheres, 'ave you, sir?" Sarah questioned, scarcely heeding his outburst.

"Seen him? No! I'm not his nurse."

"Then I'm feared he's lost," she said.

"Lost!" he ejaculated. "How the—that is, how in the name of common-sense is he to get lost?"

"He went out into the garden to Homer, sir, this mornin', and then he quietly slipped away an' he ain't been seen since."

"Indeed. But you needn't fear. Hunger will bring him home if nothing else will."

"I hope it will, sir," Sarah answered, meekly.

"You may always rely upon this," he said, condescendingly, "that things which are worthless never do get lost."

"Never, sir?" she questioned.

"Never! In this idiotic world, if anything ever gets lost, it is something that is valuable. So you may rest your heart content. The boy, like a bad penny, is certain to turn up."

But Sarah had no faith in her master's philosophy.

"I can't help worriting," she said to her husband, when lunch was over. "I'm afeared something has happened to the bairn, bless 'im; or hunger would have drove 'im 'ome afore this."

During the afternoon Homer and Sarah renewed their search in all directions, and when darkness began to fall even Philip Hardman began to look anxious, and, after fidgeting about for some considerable time, put on his hat and coat and went out.

By six o'clock it was quite dark, and rain had begun to fall again, and still the child had not put in an appearance, nor had any tidings of him been gathered.

At seven o'clock Philip Hardman sat down to his dinner in silence. He made a show of eating, as though nothing troubled him. But Sarah was keen-eyed enough to see that it was all a pretence.

For herself she had not tasted a morsel since noon, nor had Homer. As soon as possible she escaped from the dining-room, and meeting her husband in the passage she put her head upon his shoulder and began to cry.

"Oh, 'Omer," she sobbed, "can we do nothin'?"

"I don't know as 'ow we can do any more," he said, with a shake in his voice. "We must leave the rest with the Lord."

CHAPTER V.

DAY AND NIGHT.

"O, little feet! that such long years
Must wander on through hopes and fears,
Must ache and bleed beneath your load.
I, nearer to the wayside inn,
Where toil shall cease and rest begin,
Am weary, thinking of your road!"

LONGFELLOW.

ERIC's attempt to find the cistern proved very disappointing. He was ready to cry when he reached the top of the bank and saw the river stretching away again, with many a curve, till lost in the dim distance among the shadows of the overhanging trees. He had been so confident of finding its source, that the sight of the interminable valley, stretching away and away between the hills, and the river still shining at its farthest limit, came to him with quite a shock of surprise and disappointment.

"Oh, dear," he said, "what a long way off the beginning is." And then there came over him a strange sense of the immensity of things. He had never realised before how big the world might be, and how small he was in comparison therewith. In London there were very tall buildings, and seemingly endless lengths of streets; but he had always a feeling there, that if he cared to walk far enough he would get to the end of the streets and the end of the city.

But here there seemed to be no end to anything. For all he knew, this river, that rushed swiftly at his feet to leap the rocky weir, and stretched right and left like a shining band as far as eye could reach, might stretch away in both directions for ever and for ever. How did he know that it had any beginning? How did he know that it would ever have an end?

He wished Homer was with him that he might ask a few questions. Since the morning before, he had seemed to get into a new world, a world that filled him with wonder and perplexity, and that touched his heart with a new feeling of reverence and awe.

He was not in the least afraid. Indeed, there was nothing to be afraid of. All Nature seemed in the most friendly mood. The great sun had sucked all the mist out of the valleys and was bathing the hills and fields with a flood of yellow light. The sky overhead was of the palest and softest blue, which changed toward the horizon into a pearly grey. Not a cloud was to be seen anywhere. The trees stood motionless; now and then a soft breath of air gently stirred the browning leaves, and where the sun's rays caught them obliquely they burned fiery red or turned to gold.

Here and there the birds hopped on the sodden sward, and chirped in a feeble, half-hearted way. But none of them ventured on a full-throated song. Perhaps the shadow of the coming winter was upon them, in spite of the autumn sunshine, and birds are true to their feelings. Men and women may laugh and sing when their hearts are breaking, and play the hypocrite with complete success. But the song-birds are always loyal to themselves, and so are never false to men.

Eric got on to a rock at length near the edge of the weir, and sat down. It was a new experience to him to listen to the dreamy music of falling water. He had never heard anything like it before, and it soothed him like a lullaby.

At his feet the smooth water was darting like an arrow, but as he looked at it, it seemed suddenly to stop, and the rock on which he sat and the river banks and the trees to move instead. Upward he seemed to be borne at the speed of the wind, everything was moving save the river, that appeared to be perfectly still.

"Oh, this is fine," he said, clapping his hands. "It's better than being in the train. One can ride here for nothing, and there ain't any jerking either."

Then suddenly again the trees and banks stood still and the river rushed on once more. "Well, this is queer," he said, with a look of disappointment upon his face, for the illusion had been so pleasant that he wanted it to last.

But the experience was repeated again after a few minutes, and he found himself with hill and bank and tree, gliding swiftly up the stream once more.

But the novelty at length lost itself in the puzzle—Why was it so? Did the river stand still, or was it only fancy? And if it were only fancy, how came it that the fancy was as real as the reality? Surely, this was a puzzling world, and he scratched his small head in dire perplexity.

He did not heed the fact, however, that, like the river, the day was rushing swiftly on. He was too interested in Nature's pictures and voices to heed the flight of time. Indeed, it only seemed a few minutes since he had left Homer planting the wall-flowers. He did begin to feel a bit hungry, but it couldn't possibly be lunch-time, so he needn't begin to think of returning for a long time yet. He could explore the valley a little farther, and why not climb to the top of one of the hills?

This thought no sooner took shape than he began to act upon it. Clambering down from the rock, he started up the bank of the river as fast as he could run. Before him was a round wooded hill, with a bare, rocky summit. If he could only get up there, he thought, he would be able to see how big the world was.

It seemed a very long way to the foot of the hill, but he reached it at length, and found a narrow path leading up among the bracken and undergrowth in the direction he wanted to go. What an enticing path it seemed! It might have been just made on purpose for a boy his size. And how it wound in and out and to and fro! There was some fun in climbing up a path like this. Your straight roads were so stupid and monotonous, but this was simply delightful. It kept him wondering all the while what was round the next corner. Every bend and opening vista gave scope and play to his imagination. In London every opening simply meant more houses, and beyond these more houses still. There was no room for fancy to play, in that great wilderness of bricks and mortar. But here, every opening between the trees suggested an unexplored region, teeming with wonders for all he knew, and unlike anything he had ever seen before.

He got very tired at length, but he was hardly conscious of it. He knew that he was getting up all the while, and

that sooner or later he would reach the top. What a story he would have to tell Homer when he got back to Priory Mere of all he had seen. Perhaps he would be able to see Priory Mere from the top and Homer working in the garden.

Then a squirrel attracted his attention. Right across his path it ran and up a tall pine-tree which grew on the other side.

Eric stood still and watched it as it ran out on a slender and tapering branch.

"Oh, you are a funny little thing," he said, as the squirrel turned its head on one side and winked at him.

Eric put his hands to his sides and laughed, and the squirrel replied by putting its paw to its nose and winking again.

The boy was delighted, and tried to coax the little creature to come down, but the squirrel was not to be enticed. He looked at Eric out of the corner of his eye, nibbled at the bark of the branch, then spat it out, sat up on his haunches and rubbed his nose in the most impertinent manner, but made no attempt to come nearer the boy.

Eric at length, getting tired of his attempts at coaxing, clapped his hands and shouted, and master squirrel was off like a lightning flash. Almost before he had time to turn his head the creature was out of sight.

"Well, this is fine," he said to himself. "I do like the country. There is so much to be seen here. In London there is nothing to be seen but people and houses and 'buses and—and, more people. But here there are such lots of things. I do think I shall like living at Priory Mere, though uncle is so funny."

And with this soliloquy he turned on his heel and continued his toilsome way up the hill-side. He was beginning to feel very weak, consequent on his long fast, though he had not the remotest idea that he had been away so long, or that the afternoon was hastening so rapidly to its close. So new and novel was everything he saw, so wonderful the great book of Nature whose leaves he had begun to turn for the first time, that, like a child with a new toy or a new volume of pictures, he did not heed time's flight, and did not know when the gloom began to gather under the trees that it was the prelude of the swiftly advancing night.

Several times he paused to rest himself, and wondered when the bare and rocky summit would come into sight. The hill was so much bigger now he had got into close quarters with it than it had looked from the distance. He imagined he was going to reach the top directly, but as far as appearances went, he might be no nearer than when he started.

He was not of the sort, however, who give up at the first approach of difficulty. There was a lot of latent courage in his little heart. He was only a lad, but he had a fund of determination that was not soon exhausted. He was getting dreadfully faint, but it would be cowardly to turn back when he might be almost close to the top. So he struggled bravely on in spite of his growing weakness, and heedless of the gathering shades of night.

By-and-by, however, the welcome rocks that crowned the summit came into sight, and with a little cry of pleasure he rushed forward, and was soon seated on one of the smaller rocks, looking eagerly about him. His first feeling was one of exultation. He was high above the tree-tops, with the woods sloping away below him on every side. Somehow he felt bigger and more important than he had ever felt before in his life. It was a new experience to be so high up in the world. Moreover, he had accomplished the task he had set himself, and was naturally elated at his achievement.

This feeling, however, was dashed after a while by the fact that he was unable to see all he had expected to see. It was very annoying that the sun had disappeared, and that the sky was grey everywhere instead of blue. True, the light was very much better here than down in the shadow of the trees, so much better, indeed, that he did not realise even yet that the short October afternoon was hastening rapidly to its close.

Yet he wondered why a mist lay all over the fields below, and obscured all the hedges and all the houses, and blotted out every glimpse of Priory Mere. Surely it could not be that it was getting towards evening! He started up at length with a feeling almost of terror.

"I reckon I have been away too long," he said to himself. "Oh dear, I hope it is not going to get dark." And he commenced to run down the zig-zag path up which he

had come. But, oh, how very long seemed the way, and what a number of twists and turns there was! He did not remember seeing so many as he toiled slowly up, and he was not certain half his time that he was in the right path. And then, to make matters worse, the lower he got the darker it got. He could hardly see from one bend of the path to another. But all the while he was getting down, that was a satisfaction.

But even that crumb of comfort was taken away from him at length, and he stood stock still in utter bewilderment and fear. The path he was treading abruptly terminated before a dense and an impenetrable mass of foliage. Evidently he had taken the wrong turn. He rubbed his eyes energetically, and stared eagerly round him to make sure he was not mistaken, then burst into tears.

"Oh, dear," he said, "I don't like the country at all. One can't see anything, and there are no lamps and no policemen to tell the people the way, and the roads are terribly bad."

But he knew that standing still and crying would not help him, so he faced round after awhile and began to retrace his steps. By-and-by he struck another path, and as it seemed to lead downward he pursued it.

He supposed he reached the foot of the hill at length, but it was so dark he could see nothing distinctly. He knew he was on level ground; but it was no place he could remember. He looked round for the river, but he could not see it anywhere. From far away he could hear the sound of falling water; but it seemed to him in the very opposite direction from where the weir ought to be. He could see no path anywhere. Before him seemed an open field, and once or twice he thought he saw in the dim distance a glimmer of light.

"Perhaps it's Sarah lighting the lamps," he said to himself, with chattering teeth, for his fear was now so great that he was almost ready to fall.

"Yes, there it is again," he cried, as a pale ray shot across the darkness and disappeared. And setting his teeth firmly together, he rushed away into the night as fast as his feeble legs could carry him.

He did not doubt for a moment that he was making

straight for Priory Mere, when, as a matter of fact, he was going almost directly from it. On, on, still on. Very slowly, it is true, for the mist was thick about him, and his strength was almost gone! But he dashed away the wilful tears with resolute hand, and pushed forward with unflinching will.

Then splash went his little feet into water, and he tried to draw back, but beneath the six inches of water was bog, which sucked his feet like a huge leech, and held him as in a vice.

"Oh, dear," he said, struggling in vain to free himself, "what a horrid place this is! I don't like the country a bit."

Then he began to shout and scream at the top of his voice. But there was no answer to his cry, nor friendly light to be seen in the darkness.

"Oh, what shall I do?" he moaned, as he felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into the mire. "If I go on like this, I shall get out of sight."

Then he shrieked again—a shrill, agonising shriek that woke all the echoes among the hills, and died away in the distance, like a cry of pain.

It was not that he was afraid of dying, or even thought about death at all. It was the darkness, the loneliness, the awful bog that was sucking him down that so filled him with terror.

In the darkness everything seemed hideous and appalling. Horrid shapes began to dance before his eyes, and crawling things were all about him. The dark and icy water seemed literally swarming with hideous reptiles that glared at him with fiery and bloodshot eyes, and opened their awful mouths wide enough to swallow him bodily.

He grew at last quite faint with terror, and too weak to cry any more. He could only moan in an intermittent fashion, while slowly the horror of his situation began to fade away, and a dull, painless stupor to creep over him.

How long he remained in that state he never knew. But he was roused at length by a splashing in the water near him; then he espied a dog towering over him, and became conscious that the friendly creature was tugging

hard at the collar of his coat. But the effort was a vain one. His jacket came away in pieces in the dog's mouth, but he remained as firmly held as ever.

Then the dog gave a piteous whine, and bounded away from him into the darkness.

"Oh, don't go," he called, feebly and despairingly; but there was no response, and again he found himself alone.

But the faithful animal had not forsaken him. Away at the speed of the wind it rushed to a farmhouse less than a mile distant, and bounding into the kitchen, laid hold of the farmer by the skirt of his coat, and tried to drag him out of the house.

"Goodness gracious!" said the farmer's wife; "what in the world is the matter with the dog?"

"Blamed if I know," was the answer. "I hope he's not gone mad."

"I never saw him behave in this way before," she said. "And see, he's dripping wet."

"Can't make it out no road," he answered, as the dog kept bounding round and round the room, then out of the house, then back again, now tugging at the farmer's coat, now yelping in the most piteous manner.

"There's something up, you may depend," said the wife; "the dog wants you to do something, or go somewhere, or he would never carry on in this fashion. There he goes out o' the house again. Follow him, John, and see what the creature means."

So the farmer followed the dog out of the house and across the yard, and into a lane that led down into the valley. And the dumb creature, seeing that it was understood, gave a glad whine, and hurried away at a rate that sorely taxed the farmer's strength and breath.

At length the edge of the bog was reached, and the dog splashed into the water in a moment, took two or three bounds, then stood still, and lifted up his head with a piteous whine.

"Well, what is it, Rover?" the farmer asked; but the only response was another whine.

Then the dog began splashing round and round the bog, then up it, down it, across it in all directions, and, finally, came back to the farmer with slow and dejected steps,

licked his hands with a low yelp, then marched away in the direction of the farm.

"Well, this is a wild goose chase," said the farmer, with a grunt, "and a fool's errand into the bargain. If there ever was anything here it ain't here now, that's certain. So here's off home again," and turning on his heel he strode rapidly away.

CHAPTER VI.

LIFE'S MYSTERY.

"We know not what we shall be, but are sure
The spark once kindled by the eternal breath
Goes not out quite, but somewhere doth endure
In that strange life we blindly christen death.
Somewhere he is, though where we cannot tell;
But wheresoe'er God hides him, it is well."

LEWIS MORRIS.

PHILIP HARDMAN's attempt not to appear concerned about the fate of his nephew was almost pitiful. He knew it was not becoming in a philosopher to manifest anxiety about an affair so trivial as the absence, or even the death, of a child. And though only the eyes of his servants were upon him, he felt that he had a reputation to maintain, even before them; and he struggled bravely to maintain it.

He had told them often enough that philosophy—or, at least, such philosophy as he professed—had nothing to do with sentiment and emotion. It dealt simply with facts and principles. He had analysed tears, he said, and knew their constituent elements. Sentiment he despised; it belonged to the domain of religion—a pap on which weak-brained idiots fed, but which men of philosophic mind utterly scorned.

Sarah had often listened to talk of this kind with open mouth and wondering eyes. She had a certain reverence for her master. He looked so wise, and talked so learnedly, and spent so much time with his books and fossils, that she could not help feeling that he must be much wiser than the common run of men.

For herself she had no learning at all, and so she dared not contradict him, or call into question any statement he might make. As a consequence, Philip Hardman talked

philosophy to Sarah much more frequently than to her husband. Homer sometimes answered him back again, and tripped him up with awkward questions. Occasionally he had a feeling that his coachman and general *factotum* had an unspoken contempt both for himself and his philosophy. He knew that Homer had a vigorous, if untrained or ill-trained, mind, and could detect a fallacy in an argument much more quickly than many a man of better education.

Hence, as a rule, he was discreetly silent when Homer was near, or contented himself with a quiet sneer at religion, giving his man no time to answer him back.

But on the evening in question he felt that he was in very great danger of losing his reputation and discrediting his philosophy. That some evil had befallen Eric there could be no longer any reasonable doubt, and his heart was sufficiently human to feel all the anxiety of the situation.

For about ten days now the lad had been his constant companion. He had done his best to comfort him during the last few days of his mother's illness, had remained with him till after her funeral and her few effects had been disposed of, and then had brought him back to Priory Mere, with the idea that he would remain with him always, and during those days his heart had gone out to the child in a way he could not understand. His eyes were so bright and trustful, his smile so winning, his manner so unaffected, his words so ingenuous and truthful, that, stoic and pessimist as he was, he could not deny to himself that what he was pleased to call "kindly interest" was rapidly ripening into genuine affection.

So far, however, he had kept himself well in check. He had not shown the lad that he cared for him. It would not be prudent or "philosophic" to do so, nor had he given hint or sign to Sarah or Homer of the real state of affairs. On the contrary, he had tried to produce an impression the very opposite. He had spoken slightly of the boy, of the trouble he was likely to be, and of his detestation of children generally.

But in presence of this great anxiety that was pressing upon them, his philosophy was in danger of breaking down. Homer's keen eyes troubled him vastly. He felt,

too, that there was a shake in his voice that was not at all becoming.

He did his best to battle against the feeling, to appear indifferent, to speak pompous words which his heart belied. But the pretence was a sorry failure. And so directly dinner was over he rushed away to the library, and shut the door with a bang.

Here he tried to brace himself for the ordeal that lay before him, and after posturing in various attitudes he rang the bell violently.

In a moment Peggy appeared upon the scene.

"Tell Homer and Sarah to come to me at once," he said.

"Yes, sir," and Peggy as quickly disappeared.

A few moments later Sarah entered, followed by her husband.

Philip Hardman was standing with his back to the door, staring into the fire. For several seconds he did not appear to heed their presence. Then turning quickly on his heel, he said, in a pompous and questioning tone, "The brat has not returned?"

"No, sir," Sarah answered, with a little shiver.

"Then we may conclude he has got lost."

"That seems sartin enough," Homer answered.

"The chances are he's drowned," Philip Hardman said, in slow and unnatural tones. "Anyhow, we must make a pretence of finding him, so you had better take a lantern apiece and be off."

"It's just the thing we were about to do," said Homer, with trembling lip. "An' I pray the Lord may direct our steps aright."

"Come, Homer," said Hardman, savagely, "let's have none of the cant of your religion."

Homer turned away his head and made for the door. His face was very white and his fingers clutched nervously, but when he reached the threshold, he paused and turned round.

"There may be cant o' religion, sir," he said, with quivering lips, "and there may be cant o' philosophy; but I'm not aware I've given you any occasion yet for chargin' me with insincerity," and without waiting for a reply he marched out of the room.

Philip Hardman stood still in blank amazement. During all the years Homer had been with him he had never before answered him after that fashion.

"The cant of philosophy," he repeated to himself over and over again. "Does the blockhead think——?" But he did not complete the sentence. He was too angry, too anxious, too upset generally. Moreover, the suggestion was positively humiliating. Did his servant think he was a mere pretender—a philosophic prig?

He took two or three rapid turns round the room, then threw himself into his chair and began to stir the fire. But he was too concerned about Eric for Homer's words to trouble him long. He kept picturing to himself the little fellow lying stark and dead at the bottom of the river, with his pure face upturned to the sky, and that sweet smile of his still playing round his lips.

"Poor little chap!" he caught himself saying. "The struggle is early ended, the battle soon over," and into his eyes the tears came unbidden, and his lip quivered in spite of himself.

He knew that he appeared very unlike a stoic just at that moment, and he felt very thankful Homer was nowhere near to see him. He tried his best to reason himself out of his weakness, blamed himself for troubling about anything that might happen in what he called "this idiotic world," and asserted to himself again and again that if the lad was drowned it was about the best thing that could happen to him. Yet all the same, the ache would not go out of his heart nor the tremor pass from his lips.

He dreaded the bringing home of the dead child—for that the child was dead he did not doubt at all. He never felt before how difficult the rôle was he had chosen to play; and, somehow, in a trouble like this his philosophy and his fossils did not count for much. It was a humiliating confession to make even to himself, but that it was true he could not deny. Homer and Sarah might be dreamers and fanatics; but they had got hold of a very pretty idea and a very sweet hope, there was no gainsaying that—a hope and an idea that his philosophy sneered at, and which had no rational basis to rest upon. But, for all that, it was a hope that stood

people in good stead, just at a time when philosophy utterly failed.

"Ah, well," he said at length, getting hurriedly out of his chair, "everything goes wrong in this beastly world; and the man is a fool who expects anything to go right;" and with this deliverance he strode into the hall, put on his top coat and hat, and marched out of the house. The sky was clear again, and the stars were shining brightly overhead and shedding their mild radiance upon hill and wood and river.

For a few moments he paused, and looked up into the stupendous dome set with jewels of such wondrous beauty, and while he looked a slight shudder passed over him.

Why he shuddered he did not know. He had gazed into the night many times before; but never had its greatness and grandeur touched him as now—never had the stars seemed so vast nor space so immeasurable. Against his will, his thought tried to pierce the awful depth of night. It was as though he had been suddenly transported to the farthest point of light, and was peering into the unpierced immensity beyond. And still space was peopled with shining worlds, and thought marched on to other worlds, and still there were worlds beyond. And outward the widening circles ever spread, and outward yet, beyond the farthest bound of thought, and lo! there was no end to anything, no bound to space. For ever and for ever he might travel on, and still the unending path would lie before him.

"Oh, heavens!" he sighed. "What if that should be my doom," and he shuddered again, and drew his eyes away from the glittering firmament, and took two or three steps down the drive.

But the stars had somehow a fascination for him to-night. A few hurried steps and he was standing still again.

Perhaps little Eric, light as a breath, untrammelled by the clay casket in which he had dwelt, was passing onward to these outer worlds, sporting with the wind and the clouds, or chasing the stars in their glorious flight.

He had said for years that death was the end of man. But how did he know there was an end to anything? The comets swept sometimes within the range of our vision.

For a few days or weeks they lived before us, then gently faded away again into the gulf of space out of which they had come. Had they ceased to be? Oh, no! They were sailing onward still.

Was a man less than a comet? Out of the womb of eternity the new life came, and slowly grew for twenty or thirty years, then gently faded away into the eternity out of which it had come. Was that the end?

There was no end to space; no end to time. How did he know that anything ended? Where was his philosophy now? What did it prove?

Beneath those solemn stars he felt again the rebuke of Homer's words. His own words were vanity. His toying with science a waste of time. His little conceits the tricks of a feeble mind. And yet he was not incapable of larger thoughts than those to which he daily gave utterance. While depths of feeling lay hidden in his nature that no one had ever dreamed of.

"I'm a bit of a hypocrite, or else I'm growing morbid," he said, shaking himself and beginning to button his overcoat. "That boy has upset everything. I wish he had drowned himself a month ago, then I should have been saved all this bother."

And he marched quickly away along the carriage drive, which at length wound round the foot of the plantation and out into a broad country road—the highway, in fact, between the great manufacturing towns of Yarncaster and Ribbleford.

"I'm too restless to go back yet," he said, walking along on the raised footpath in the shadow of a tall hedge. "I think I'll go on to the village; I may hear something of the boy; who knows? Anyhow, I may forget myself for an hour or two at the club." And he quickened his pace into a sharp walk, and soon came in sight of Lindon Church, which was lighted up for evening service.

It was a quaint old church, large and low, with a square, squat tower half overgrown with ivy, and a chancel window that was the pride of the village.

At the open churchyard gate Philip Hardman paused for several seconds, then made as though he would go forward into the village, and finally turned quickly on his heel and passed into the churchyard.

At the church porch he paused again. The little congregation within was singing the hymn before the sermon—a quaint, slow melody that fitted well the words they sang—

“Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.”

He could not see the congregation. But he knew pretty well its composition. A few gentlefolks and pious maiden ladies, but mainly farm labourers and servants, who had turned in for a quiet hour after the toil of the day, thankful for this little break in the monotony of their weekly toil.

For a moment, while he listened, his lips curved with scorn, but the expression soon died away, and a look of deep seriousness settled upon his face. Without thought of him, the little congregation still sang on—

“The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their cares and fears,
Are carried downward by the flood,
And lost in following years.”

“Ay, ay!” he said, “that is true enough. It won’t do them any harm to sing that. Poor simple souls, perhaps they find comfort in wailing out their deeper thoughts in that fashion.”

And he turned and walked away to the farther end of the churchyard. Leaving the gravelled path at length, he struck across the grassy hillocks until he came to a grave marked by a simple cross of white marble. On the square marble base in which the cross was set was an inscription, invisible now in the faint starlight, but he knew every word of it. While he looked at the stone the letters seemed to burn before his eyes:—

IN MEMORY OF
MARY,
THE BELOVED WIFE OF THE
REV. JOHN LEICESTER,
Who died May 10, 18—,
AGED TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS.
“GONE HOME.”

For awhile he stood motionless as the marble cross. Then he heaved a deep sigh and bowed his head.

"Ah, Mary," he whispered softly to himself, "things might have been different had you been true to me. But I had no chance against his oily tongue. Ah, well, you are both dust. But he sleeps with his second wife many a league from here. Some day, Mary, I shall come and sleep by your side, and in the ages to come our dust will mingle, though we shall be unconscious of the fact."

The ten minutes' sermon in the church had come to an end. The Benediction had been pronounced, the lights had been put out one by one till only a faint glimmer shone from the window of the Rector's vestry.

Philip Hardman turned away from the grave and retraced his steps; the light went out in the vestry and the rector slammed the door behind him, and a moment or two later the two men met face to face.

CHAPTER VII.

KNOWING THE WORST.

Upward I looked with shuddering awe,
And in the glowing gloom that bound me,
Full many a dismal shape I saw,
Slow winging in the air around me;
Grim-visaged death, and fierce despair,
Hard unbelief, with aspect sneering;
And ruin, with affrighted stare,
Disastrous through the mist appearing."

GRIFFIN.

PHILIP HARDMAN left the churchyard in a much more cheerful frame of mind than when he entered it. His encounter with the Rector—the Rev. Thomas Lane—had lasted nearly an hour, and he felt that he had scored a point—several points, in fact. Metaphorically, he had pounded the rector to a jelly, and left him helpless and speechless.

The rector did not think so. On the contrary, he believed he had given Philip Hardman such a "doubling up" as he would never forget to the day of his death. The rector stood still and laughed more than once on his way to the rectory. The recollection of the encounter—of the arguments and passages of Scripture with which he had pelted his unbelieving parishioner—tickled him immensely.

"He must feel dreadfully small," he chuckled. "If I were to receive such a drubbing I should be half disposed to hang myself."

It was well for each that he could not see the other at that moment. Both men felt so confident of victory that it would have been a pity to have disturbed their self-complacency.

"It's been like a tonic," said Philip Hardman to him-

self, as he strode rapidly homeward. "Just the thing I needed to brace me up. I was actually getting mopish and sentimental. But to have that old fossil flinging about his antiquated arguments has been like a shower-bath on a hot day. I feel quite revived and refreshed."

And Philip Hardman lifted his head and actually began to whistle.

"I needed something to get me out of the dumps," he said to himself after awhile. "This bother about the boy has upset me dreadfully. I almost wish, though, I had not mentioned it to the rector. Likely as not he will be at Priory Mere to-morrow morning, making inquiries. Anyhow, he will not want to see me. It will take him all his time for the next month to gather up the shattered and scattered fragments of his arguments and piece them together again. Oh dear, what a drubbing I did give him," and he smiled broadly at the thought.

As he drew near his home, however, more serious thoughts took possession of him. The bare possibility of having a dead child brought into his house, the upset of an inquest, the trouble of a funeral, filled him with dismay.

To have Priory Mere thrown open to public gaze seemed like sacrilege in his eyes. The place hitherto had been almost a *terra incognita*, with an air of romance and mystery about it which no one had been able to pierce. But if doctors and jurymen and undertakers were to be allowed to tramp through the place all the romance would vanish, and it would become as commonplace as any other house in the neighbourhood.

By the time he had rounded the bend in the carriage drive and come in sight of the house, all his cheerfulness had evaporated.

"Hullo!" he said, as he saw lights in several of the upstairs windows, "what is the meaning of this?" and he quickened his pace into a rapid stride. "I wonder if they have found the little chap?" he muttered, as he pulled the door-bell violently. "I hardly know what has come to me, but I feel dreadfully anxious."

The next moment the door was thrown open, and Peggy stood before him.

"Oh, master," she exclaimed, before he had time to speak; "they've found 'im."

"Found him where?" he gasped.

"In Routor bog," she said.

"In Routor bog?" he echoed, growing pale to the lips.

"Aye," Peggy went on. "It was Robin Ray as found 'im an' brought 'im home. Sarah an' 'Omer met 'im down by the river, with Master Eric on his back."

Philip Hardman did not wait to hear any more, but rushed upstairs without even pausing to take off his hat.

At Eric's bedroom door, which stood ajar, he stood still for a moment. From within came the subdued voices of Homer and Sarah.

"The little lamb," Sarah was saying, with a pathetic shake in her voice; "he's sleeping sweetly now."

"Ay, my lass," Homer answered, "after struggle, rest."

Philip Hardman gave a great gulp. Their words could have but one meaning. And brushing his hand quickly across his eyes, he pushed open the door and entered.

Both Homer and Sarah drew back from the bed when they heard his footstep, and, without a word, he passed in front of them to the side of the sleeping child.

For a few seconds he saw nothing for the tears that had gathered in his eyes, and which he had not courage to wipe away.

Then he bent over the bed, and as he did so the tears fell, and he saw in a moment that the child was not dead, but sweetly sleeping.

The revulsion of feeling was so great that he was almost ready to choke. Yet to betray any emotion before Homer and Sarah would be fatal to his reputation. A philosopher with tears in his eyes, a stoic with a lump in his throat--whoever heard of such a thing? The situation was a most painful one. He could not recover himself. He dared not show his face.

In a few seconds, however, he got sufficient command of himself to be able to say, hoarsely and savagely, "Leave the room."

And without a word Homer and Sarah meekly obeyed.

Then he quietly turned the key in the lock, and came back to the bedside and sat down. He felt he was not master of himself yet. He never remembered being so much moved before. Again and again, as he looked at the peaceful face of the sleeping lad, the tears started un-

bidden to his eyes, and words of thankfulness leaped to his lips.

Words, however, which he could not utter. He could not thank a blind fate, or a combination of circumstances, or a piece of good luck. And as he did not believe in a personal Deity, and regarded the Christian doctrine of Providence in the light of a silly superstition, he had to force back the grateful feeling, and keep his teeth firmly shut.

Yet the very fact of feeling thankful when there was no one to be thankful to struck him as being very odd. Why did he want to fall down on his knees by the bedside and pour out his heart in gratitude, when there was no ear to listen, or heart to respond? It seemed very stupid of Nature to implant a feeling or instinct within him when there was nothing in all the broad universe to correspond with it. It was like giving eyes without light, or veins without blood.

"Of course, Homer would say there is a correspondence," he reflected. "But, then, what does Homer know? Science can find no God, and my philosophy knows Him not."

And he got up and took two or three turns round the room, slowly and noiselessly.

After awhile he sat down again, arrested by a low moan that escaped the lips of the sleeper. Then he noticed for the first time that a red spot was burning on the lad's cheek, and that his breathing was becoming laboured and hurried.

"It's the reaction after the hunger and excitement of the afternoon, I expect," he said to himself. "But what can he have been after I wonder to get into Router bog?"

The next moment Eric opened his eyes and looked up with a smile.

And for a moment Philip Hardman forgot himself and smiled back in return, then asked, in tones that were tremulous with emotion, "Well, Eric, my boy, how are you?"

"Oh, I am all right, uncle, I think," he answered, with an effort. "But I'm afraid I've been naughty. I hope you won't scold me."

"Well, I don't know," Philip Hardman said, looking grave. "I must hear first what explanation you have to give."

Then the boy's eyes filled. "I didn't know it would be dark so soon," he said, swallowing a big lump that had risen in his throat. "I did feel hungry, but I didn't know I'd been away very long."

"But how did you get into Routor bog?" his uncle asked.

"What the place were Martin found me?"

"Yes."

"Oh, but a dog found me before Martin," he interposed, with sudden animation.

"Never mind the dog, tell me how you got there."

"Well, you know, I went up to find the cistern that the big river comes out of. It's a very big cistern, isn't it, uncle?"

Hardman laughed.

"Why do you laugh, uncle?" Eric questioned.

"Never mind; you will know better in time. But tell me how you got into the bog."

"Oh, I went up by the river, ever such a long way, and then I sat down on a big stone and had a ride."

"A ride?" Hardman questioned.

"Yes! you look at the river a bit and then it stops, and then away you go, stones and trees and everything. Oh, it was such fun!"

"Well, and what then?"

"Then I went on further to find the cistern."

"And you found it, of course?" laughed Hardman.

"Oh, no, I didn't," Eric answered, looking grave. "But I climbed to the top of a great big mountain—a mountain like you see in books, uncle. Oh, it was a big mountain, the biggest you ever saw."

Hardman smiled broadly. "No doubt, Eric, no doubt," he said. "And what did you see on the top?"

"Oh, I thought I should see Priory Mere, and Homer working in the garden, but I didn't."

"Well never mind what you didn't see, that I'm afraid would take too long to tell. Let us know what you did see."

"Oh, I saw such a funny thing as I was going up—like a cat, and not like a cat either. A little brown thing, with bright eyes and a bushy tail."

"You saw that going up. But I want to know what you saw when you got up."

"Oh, I don't think I saw very much. There was a fog all about, not like the fogs in London. But I couldn't see Priory Mere, so I came down again."

"Well, and what then?"

"Then it got dark ever so fast, and I missed my way, and there were no policemen about anywhere, nor lamps, nor anything, and I came straight off here as straight as I could."

"Yes, Eric, go on."

"I think I got very frightened, uncle, for it was very quiet and lonely, and then I got into the water, and the more I tried to get out the more I couldn't, and I kept sinking lower and lower, and then, and then——Why then you see I screamed. I was bound to scream, uncle, I couldn't help it."

"Yes, yes, go on," he said, blowing his nose violently at the same time.

"Well, it was very cold, and I was dreadfully tired, and I did want to get home, though I expected you would scold me very much."

"And did you think you would be drowned?"

"No, I don't think I thought about that very much; but I did want to get out, and wished I hadn't left Homer."

"And you weren't afraid of being drowned?"

"I don't think I know very well what being drowned is," he said, with a puzzled look in his eyes. "But it was very horrid, and then a big dog came to me and got hold of the collar of my coat. I'm afraid he's pulled the collar off, uncle; but I couldn't help it."

"Oh, well, we'll not trouble about the coat collar," Harcman answered.

"Oh, that is kind of you, uncle. I thought, perhaps, you'd be dreadfully put out at having my clothes torn; but I don't think the dog would have torn my coat if he could have helped it."

"Likely not. But what next?"

"Then the dog went away and left me. Oh, I did want him to stay, for he was a bit of company, you see, and it was terribly lonely."

"Terribly lonely? I should think so."

"But Martin came directly after," Eric answered, brightly. "He heard me crying after the dog. And

came to see 'what was up,' he said. He's fearful strong is Martin, and got me out in no time. But—but——"

"Well, what?" he asked, seeing the boy's hesitation.

"I think you ought to know the worst, uncle," Eric answered after a pause, and turning his head uneasily on the pillow. "But it wasn't Martin's fault, they came off without his knowing it."

"What came off?" Hardman asked.

"My shoes, uncle; I'm very sorry. But now you know the worst. I hope you will not be very angry. But mother used to say it was always best to tell the truth."

"Well, if that is the worst, I don't think I shall mind very much," Hardman answered, with a smile. "We can easily get a new pair of shoes for you. And as for the rest, we'll say nothing about it now. I fancy you have learnt a lesson you will not soon forget."

"And you are not very angry, uncle?" he said, pleadingly.

"Well—no, I'm not very angry, seeing it is the first time; and you didn't know any better. But if you were to do such a thing a second time I should be very angry indeed."

"I'll try not to do such a thing again," he said, wearily; "but I am glad you know the worst," and he closed his eyes as though overcome with sleep.

The "worst," however, was not yet. Before morning he was tossing in a raging fever, and as soon as it was dawn Homer was despatched to Ribbleford to fetch a doctor.

Then followed an anxious week, during which the little fellow's life trembled in the balance, and no one knew from hour to hour which way the scale would turn.

The feverishness proved to be but a symptom of acute congestion of the lungs, consequent upon the cold and exposure of the previous day. And for many a long day and night he lay gasping away his strength, but uttering no word of complaint.

Sarah nursed him with untiring patience, scarcely ever leaving his side. Homer came in from the garden a dozen times a day to make inquiries. Peggy moved round the house with red eyes, never speaking to any one; while Philip Hardman affected the philosopher and stoic, and made pretence of an indifference he did not feel, but succeeded in deceiving no one.

So the weary days and nights passed on. Hardman chafed and fumed at the lateness of his meals and the general upset of his establishment: declared it was too bad that a man of his literary and scientific tastes should be so disturbed, and vehemently asserted—particularly if Homer was near—that this was the most idiotic world that could possibly be conceived of.

Homer, however, was not to be hoodwinked by his bluster. He knew that his master was consumed with anxiety all the while, and so pitied him and held his peace.

At the end of a week the doctor gave very little hope of Eric's recovery. But Sarah never despaired for a moment. She could not believe that the mission of his life was yet accomplished. In her simple and honest heart she had pictured for him a great future.

"No," she said to Homer; "he ain't a-goin' to die yet. You mark my words. He'll live to be a man, and do some'at useful."

And with this conviction in her heart she nursed him with a patient faith that never faltered for a moment, and when, by-and-by, the doctor said the danger was over, and that with good nursing he would be all right again in a week or two, Sarah walked out into the garden to Homer with a face aglow with delight.

"I know'd it," she said; "I told you so, you unbelieving Thomas. Now don't you come a worriting me wi' your doubts again."

"Does the doctor say he will get better?" Homer asked, anxiously.

"Of course he does; what else could he say?" she replied.

"Well, if he says so I'll believe it," said Homer, and, with a smile of content upon his face he settled again to his work.

It was not until nearly Christmas, however, that Eric was allowed to come downstairs, but in his large bedroom he found so many toys and picture-books that he did not seem to mind the confinement. Sometimes, on sunshiny days, when he looked out over the wintry landscape, a momentary longing would creep into his heart for the freedom of the lanes and fields, but it would only last a moment. The

memory of that one day's freedom was all too vivid yet for him to be eager to repeat the experiment.

So he quietly played with his toys, or turned the pages of his picture-books, or dreamed of the future that lay in shadow before him.

Sometimes his uncle came and kept him company for awhile; sometimes Peggy was sent to take part in his games; while during the long evenings both Homer and Sarah shared his playroom, and helped him to while away the tedious hours.

Sarah was his *confidante*. To her he confided his hopes and dreams, and often they would talk together of that unknown future which, to the imagination of both, was so full of untold possibilities. Sarah encouraged him to talk, and he was always pleased to have her listen. Yet neither guessed what lay in store for him, for as yet no shadow of coming events lay upon his path.

CHAPTER VIII.

EDUCATION.

“ Ah ! my heart is weary waiting,
• Waiting for the May—
Waiting for the pleasant rambles,
Where the fragrant hawthorn brambles,
With the woodbine alternating,
Scent the dewy way.
Ah ! my heart is weary waiting,
Waiting for the May.”

ANON.

THE winter wore very slowly away. To Eric it almost seemed as though the warm weather would never come again. While he had remained in his bedroom he was fairly content. But directly he got down stairs he was eager to get into the open air again. This, however, was strictly forbidden by the doctor. Any fresh cold, he said, might prove very serious ; and not until the warm weather came, and the east winds were over, should he venture much out of doors.

So Eric had to submit, and he did so with as good grace as possible, but the confinement was intensely irksome to him. Christmas came and went, but it produced no break in the monotony of his life. Philip Hardman refused to recognise the great Christian festival in any way. He had a feeling that he had been sufficiently inconsistent of late, and had betrayed a very unphilosophic weakness on several occasions ; hence, if for the sake of giving pleasure to Eric, he was to depart in any way from his usual custom, he felt that he would be countenancing a silly superstition ; and that, of course, would be unworthy of a philosopher.

So Christmas Day dawned cold and clear, but without any mention being made of the fact that it *was* Christmas.

Eric was aroused early by the ringing of Lindon bells. And for a long time he lay awake, wondering why the bells rang that day. He knew it was not Sunday; moreover, it was so very early in the morning, and, besides, he never remembered hearing such a wild revel of the bells before. But he left off wondering after awhile, and gave himself up to thorough enjoyment of the music. It was so pleasant to lie there in his warm bed under the soft Eider down, while the dreamy music rose and fell on the still morning air.

He could not help feeling that he had a great deal to be thankful for, notwithstanding he was kept a prisoner in the house. Sarah and Homer seemed as though they could never do enough for him, and although his uncle occasionally betrayed a good deal of irritation, and now and then assumed a manner of cold indifference, he knew that in his heart he was not indifferent, and that his coldness was more apparent than real.

Homer and Sarah felt exceedingly the restraint that had been put upon them. To make no allusion to Christ on Christmas Day—the day when in all parts of the world the great festival was being celebrated—was irksome and painful almost beyond endurance. Eric was particularly merry and inquisitive. He wanted to know of Homer why the bells rang so early in the morning, and why he did not work in the garden as usual, and whether he was going to Ribbleford, seeing he had his best clothes on.

Homer nearly bit his lip through in trying to keep silent. He almost hungered to take the lad upon his knee, and tell him the wonderful story of the Christ of Nazareth. Against his master his heart rebelled as it had never done before. This edict of silence was cruel beyond measure, and more than once he was on the point of breaking through every restraint and taking the consequences.

But Sarah always came to the rescue. She had, on the whole, more worldly wisdom than her husband, and when she saw Homer struggling to repress himself she would adroitly turn the conversation, or lead Eric away into another room.

So Christmas Day passed, as passed the other days of the week. In Lindon the bells rang and the people went to church and chapel, and when the shadows of night fell again, the waits went forth and sang:—

“ God rest you, merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay ;
Remember Christ, your Saviour,
Was born on Christmas Day.”

But no note of their song floated down to Priory Mere. There was a story current among the village singers that many years before, the waits, with a courage that outran their discretion, serenaded Philip Hardman early one Christmas morning.

The experiment, however, was never repeated. They had scarcely got through the first stanza of

“ Christians awake, salute the happy morn,”

when they repented of their temerity. They had got close under Hardman's window, grouped together as compactly as possible, and were giving out such a volume of sound that they did not hear the window above them open, and were not aware that they had awakened a Christian until they stopped suddenly short, with a gasp and a shudder, as a cataract of icy water fell full upon them.

The retreat they beat was more hasty than dignified, and the language they used more forcible than polite. They did not try to awaken any more Christians that day, nor did they relate their adventure for many days after. For some considerable time it was a moot point as to who was the more successful waker of Christians—Philip Hardman or the waits. Philip Hardman felt that he had the best of it, and rightly conjectured that his Christmas morning's nap would not again be very soon disturbed.

So the waits, while they serenaded most of the villagers, gave Priory Mere a wide berth; and as a consequence—save for the bells—no note of Christmas music or echo of the angel's song fell on Eric's ears.

As time passed on Philip Hardman began to feel that his experiment was likely to be a success. To begin with, the boy had little or nothing to unlearn; whatever his mother might have done for him, she had evidently not vexed him with religious questions. He was as ignorant of the Catechism as he was of the geography of the moon. Moreover, it was evident that Homer and Sarah were loyally obeying his instructions, and though much against their will, and, indeed, much against their conscience, were

allowing the lad to grow up in utter ignorance of their religious views and professions.

When Eric had fully recovered his strength, Hardman undertook the work of tutor. To send the lad to school would upset all his plans. Hence there was no help for it. If the lad was to know anything at all, he must teach him himself. So two hours every day were devoted to this work. Eric entered into his uncle's scheme with enthusiasm. It was a further proof of his kindness, as well as a pleasant break in his monotonous life.

In fact, time seemed to pass much more quickly after that. The boy proved himself a diligent student from the first. His lessons, instead of being a burden, were a delight, and when at length he was able to read without spelling the words, it almost seemed as though he had been translated into a new world.

His uncle's musty and gloomy old library became to him the most delightful room in the house, and the dingy books, that once he so much despised, were veritable treasure troves, yielding him unspeakable delight. True, there were hundreds of volumes that he never looked into but once, but scattered up and down the big and somewhat bewildering library there were books that just suited his taste and whetted his appetite for more.

"Sandford and Merton" was the first book he struggled through. It took him many a long evening to master its contents, for he skipped none of its pages. Indeed, he re-read many of its prosier paragraphs, so anxious was he to understand its meaning, and when he reached the end he laid it down with a sigh, feeling as though one of the greatest pleasures of his life had too soon and too suddenly terminated. At that moment he believed there could not be another book in the world half so interesting. Certainly in his uncle's library there could be nothing that would compare with it. He had looked into scores of them before he came across this treasure, and they were all, as far as he could judge, dry as dust, and much above his comprehension. "Sandford and Merton" was the gem of the collection, so he honestly believed, and he was almost ready to cry that in his first excursion into the field of literature he had exhausted all its delights.

For a long time he sat with the book in his lap, staring disconsolately into the fire.

His uncle, who had been vainly endeavouring to master an article in *The Edinburgh Review*, looked up at last, and was struck with the sad expression on Eric's face.

"Well, boy, tired of reading?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, no, uncle," Eric answered readily; "I was only wishing the book was longer."

"Longer, eh? You don't mean to say you have read it all?"

"Yes, I have; every word of it."

Philip Hardman lay back in his chair and laughed softly.

"Don't you think it is a delightful book, uncle?" Eric asked at length.

"I guess in books," he answered, "it's all a matter of taste. But I fancy most boys nowadays would vote the book frightfully slow."

"Oh, no," Eric answered, with flushed cheeks, "I don't see how that could be. I don't believe there is another such delightful book in the world."

Hardman laughed again.

"Do you think there are nicer books?" he questioned, eagerly.

"All a matter of taste, Eric—all a matter of taste," was the reply.

"I only wish I could find another half so good," the boy said dolefully, and then relapsed into silence.

Hardman pulled out his watch. "Humph," he said, "it is not bed-time yet; so I think I will lend you a helping hand in finding something quite as entertaining as 'Sandford and Merton.'"

"Oh, that will be jolly," the boy exclaimed, as he rose eagerly from his chair.

"I was only a lad myself when I came to Priory Mere," Hardman went on, in a sudden burst of confidence. "Only a lad. Ah, me, how the time flies! Sometimes it seems only as yesterday since I came, and sometimes it seems an age. There are moments, boy, when I lose sight of the intervening space, and *then* and *now* seem close together. But when memory awakens and begins to thread her way

slowly back and back, pausing at every little event that marks the way, then, boy, it seems as though I must have lived here a thousand years."

Eric looked at his uncle in wonder, but did not speak.

"Ah, boy," Hardman went on, "I am not certain that it is the best thing for a man to live alone, as I have done. But there, it can't be helped now. This is an idiotic world, Eric, as you will find out quite soon enough. If you can get any pleasure in youth, get it by all means. I am glad you have enjoyed 'Sandford and Merton.'"

"I think it delightful," the boy answered.

"Then we will find something else, which, perhaps, will please you quite as well. There must be a lot of boys' books hidden away somewhere."

And he got out the ladder, and began to pull out the books on one of the top shelves.

"Ah, here they are, Eric," he said, with a laugh which was followed by a sigh. "It's many a long year since I saw them before. Their bindings have got sadly faded, and I fear the damp has touched some of them. How old memories awaken at sight of their familiar covers!"

"Are they story books?" Eric asked, with an eager look in his eyes.

"Story books? Ay, in abundance," he answered. "Here's 'Robinson Crusoe,' and the 'Arabian Nights,' and 'Don Quixote,' and 'Gulliver's Travels,' and 'Grimm's Fairy Tales.'"

"But are they nice?" Eric asked, opening his eyes with wonder.

"A matter of taste, boy—a matter of taste. I used to think them great fun when I was a boy. But times have changed."

"Oh, then, likely I shall enjoy them," Eric said.

"Yes; very likely you will," was the reply. "But if you don't, here are 'Cook's Voyages Round the World' and 'Mungo Park's Travels,' and, bless me! here's the 'Newgate Calendar' and 'The Lives of Pirates.' Yes, you will find all sorts here."

And he came down the ladder with an armful of books and threw them on the table.

By bed-time that evening Eric was well into the delights of "Robinson Crusoe," and while he read Philip Hardman



"Are they story books?"

watched his face from over the top of his spectacles, and noted every varying expression.

Once or twice he sighed and wished himself a boy again. Faith, Hope, and Love, the heritage of all children, he had lost in the wilderness of life. And though he was comparatively a young man yet, the world seemed to have nothing to offer, and life was only a burden and a disappointment.

Then he took up the *Review* he had laid down, and tried once more to read, but it was a fruitless effort. The subtle article on the philosophy of Comte was altogether beyond him, and even the little he did understand seemed to have for him no living or human interest.

Eric, however, was delightfully oblivious of all his surroundings; and when bed-time came he stole away with great reluctance, and would have taken his "Crusoe" with him had he dared.

So began Eric's new life—a new life also to Philip Hardman. The two hours he spent each morning with his nephew were to him the pleasantest portion of the day. Had Eric been a dunce his work as tutor would have been less pleasant. But the boy was so quick in catching up the points that it was a real pleasure to instruct him.

So the winter wore away, and died in the beauty of spring; and when the east winds were over Eric took long rambles across the fields and through the plantation. Sometimes his uncle accompanied him, but oftener he went alone. He had a passionate love of Nature, and so did not seem to feel the lack of human companions. Yet the time was coming when he was destined to experience a change in this respect.

Meanwhile, however, he was quite content to live with the elderly people at Priory Mere. Never having known the companionship of children, he felt no sense of loss at their absence. Occasionally he went as far as Lindon, and once or twice he had stopped in the street to watch the boys at some noisy game. But he had never felt any desire to join them. The noise and horsplay that seemed inseparable from their games repelled him rather than enticed him. And when he got back to Priory Mere he would steal away to the library, and find pleasure in the companionship of his books.

So spring wore away and summer came, and swept the earth with beauty; and autumn ripened the fields, and winter closed the year once more, and nothing happened to disturb the even tenour of his life. And the second year of his life at Priory Mere passed as the first had done, and the third as the second, and the fourth as the third.

It was during the sixth year that a new influence touched his life, and a new pleasure was added to the many that had gone before it.

CHAPTER IX.

A CHANCE MEETING.

“ The valley smiled in living green ;
• A tree, which near it gave
From noontide heat a friendly screen,
Drank from its limpid wave.
The swallow brushed it with her wing,
And followed its meandering.”

STODART.

It was a glorious afternoon in June. Eric, tired of study, started on a long walk up the river-side. It was not a walk he often took, for since that early experience of his, when he got lost, and so nearly perished in Routor Bog, he had avoided bending his steps in that direction. To-day, however, though for no particular reason, he chose the river-side. He had no fear of getting lost again, for he had explored the country thoroughly for many miles around. Nor in those long, June days was there any probability that he would get benighted, and besides—and he drew himself up proudly at the thought—he was big enough now to take care of himself.

Nor was his confidence in this respect misplaced. He was tall for his age, and well-proportioned, with a manner a little too staid, perhaps, but not to be wondered at, since he had spent all his life with elderly folk. His carriage was erect and graceful: his head well set: his every movement denoting strength and purpose.

Philip Hardman had grown to be proud of his lithe and handsome nephew: proud of his proficiency in many branches of study: proud of his physical courage and daring; but proud most of all that he had realised his ideal in the matter of religious belief or unbelief, and that he had entered upon his teens, and upon the higher

branches of study perfectly untrammelled by creed or dogma.

Homer and Sarah, with much inward fighting and many qualms of conscience, had been faithful to their master. Often they had debated the question, but had always in the end come back to the same conclusion—that it was better they should stay, even though their mouths were shut.

“If we was to go,” Sarah argued with stubborn persistence, “the master might get a regular infidel to take our place. Think of that, Homer.”

“Aye,” Homer would reply, with downcast looks, “that ’ud be a mighty sight worse than our remainin’ on in silence.”

“In course it would,” Sarah would answer. “An’ besides, Homer, lives speak louder nor lectures, an’ love wins the hardest battles.”

“Aye, that’s true, my lass,” Homer would reply. “We may not talk the Testament, but we can live square, an’ perhaps that’ll turn out best i’ th’ end.”

“We’ll hope so, any how,” would be Sarah’s reply, “though it does seem a pity to see sich a brave bonny lad growin’ up without any outward forms of religion.”

“Aye, it does grieve me above a bit,” Homer would make answer, “though there’s always this comfort, Sarah, that he’s a deal of in’ard goodness.”

So the subject would be dropped. But only to be taken up on some future occasion, and argued out once more.

Eric, however, was utterly unconscious of this anxious solicitude on his behalf. And had any one told him that his uncle was deliberately training him in ignorance of religious truth, he would not have believed them. As far as he could judge, his uncle hid nothing from him. He was allowed to read any book in the library. It is true, he had never seen a New Testament, but then, as Philip Hardman would have said, he had never seen the Koran.

So he grew up unbiassed and unprejudiced. Believing in right and truth and goodness for their own sake. His religion was simply morality. The touch of emotion of which Matthew Arnold speaks was so far unfelt by him. He was not conscious, however, that he lacked anything.

What most we feel the want of is that which we once possessed, but have lost. Diogenes, seeing a quantity of rich furniture and rugs carted through the street, said, "Now I see how many things there are I do not want." Had he, however, been brought up amidst the luxuries of a rich home the chances are he would have wanted them still.

Eric had lost nothing yet, and so had no feeling of lack. He was never boisterously happy. It had never been his to anticipate birthdays and Christmas parties. If he had ever yearned for the companionship of children the feeling had nearly, if not wholly, died out. The music of his life had been pitched in a low, perhaps a minor, key. But since he had known nothing more jubilant, he seemed quite content. He was as happy rambling away alone as most other young people are in company. If he had no one to rejoice with, there was, on the other hand, no one with whom he could quarrel. So, when the balance was struck, he was not, on the whole, badly off.

He could hardly fail being happy on the June day in question. There was no sign of sadness anywhere. In the meadows the cattle grazed contentedly, standing knee-deep in the grass, or lay lazily chewing their cuds in the shadow of the trees. Down by the river-side the kingfishers and wagtails darted swiftly hither and thither among the clouds of flies that hung suspended above the placid water, while now and then from distant hill-sides would float a snatch of song with which some toiling rustic cheered the summer afternoon.

Eric smiled, on reaching the river's brink, as the remembrance of that early adventure came back to him. It seemed to him a very long time ago, for time had travelled slowly during those intervening years, and though there were very few events to assist the memory in travelling back, perhaps, because of the very monotony of his life, the years had seemed so long.

"I must have been a silly baby," he said to himself, with a slight curl of his lip. "And yet I remember how delighted I was. I suppose it was the very delight that made me forgetful of the long way I travelled; anyhow, it taught me a lesson." And he quickened his pace along the slightly-worn path.

On reaching the weir he paused for awhile; then climbed on to the rock on which he sat six years before, and watched the limpid water shooting past, swift as an arrow—watched it till, as before, the river seemed to stand still, and bank and tree and distant hill began to glide swiftly away in the opposite direction.

If he did not enjoy the sensation as much as in that early time it was still a very real pleasure to him, and he sat on the rock much longer than he had at first intended. When he did make a move, it was to pursue the path he had travelled before.

“I’ll climb the hill again,” he said to himself, with a laugh. “I’ve never been up it since that day.”

He did not seem in any hurry, however, to reach his destination. The day was too warm for violent exercise, so he loitered lazily along and up the winding path, pausing every now and then to pluck a flower, or to examine more closely some specimen of fern.

When at length he did emerge from the shadow of the trees out on the bare summit of the hill he drew back with a start, and for a moment debated whether or not he should beat a hasty retreat the way he had come.

He discovered, to his alarm, that he was not alone. Seated high on one of the rocks, and calmly surveying the distant landscape that lay steeped in a haze of yellow light, was a fair-haired girl, of some twelve or thirteen summers.

Had a lion been seated on the rock he would not have been nearly so much alarmed. But a girl was to him such an utterly unknown quantity that all his courage evaporated in a moment. He had always been shy, even with boys, when occasionally he met them. But a girl nearly as old as himself, a girl so beautifully dressed and with such a lovely face, almost took his breath away.

While he hesitated whether or not he should turn and run, she turned her head in his direction, and their eyes met. And in a moment her lips parted in a smile, and her face lit up as though a wave of sunshine swept over it.

Eric blushed to the roots of his hair, then raised his cap and tried to smile back in return.

“Were you coming up here?” she asked, still smiling. And to Eric her voice sounded sweet as a silver bell.*

"I did think of doing so," he stammered, growing very red again; "but really, I don't mind in the least."

At which reply she laughed outright.

"You needn't fear," she said when she had recovered herself. "I won't eat you—I won't, really!"

"I'm not afraid," Eric said, stoutly, trying his best to laugh at the joke; "only I don't wish to intrude."

"Oh, you are funny!" she said, laughing again. "Do you know, I feel quite interested?"

Eric bit his lip and was silent. At which the fair speaker on the rock grew suddenly grave.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," she said; "so please come up here on the rock. There's quite room enough for two, and besides, there's such a lovely breeze, and one can see ever such a distance."

"Thank you, but I am not at all tired," Eric replied, feeling very confused, and most sincerely wishing there was some way by which he might escape without appearing rude.

The girl frowned, then smiled, and finally laughed outright again.

Eric grew desperate. What right had this girl to laugh at him? A stranger, too; for in all his rambles he had never seen her before. Yet her laugh sounded so full of music and good nature, and her eyes were so brimful of merriment, that it was difficult to feel resentment. Indeed, after a few moments he began to laugh himself, in a shy, half-hearted way.

"Oh, look here!" she said, coming near the edge of the rock, and looking down on him. "I don't think we understand each other, do you?"

"No, I don't," he said, abruptly.

The answer was not just what she expected. So she bit her lip, and drew back again. The tone of his voice was almost rude. His manner repelled her, so she took up a book that was lying on the rock beside her, and began to read.

Eric relented and repented. "I must be a bear," he said to himself; "and she is so bonny, too. I wonder who she can be. She must be a stranger, or I should have seen her before. What lovely hair."

And he took two or three steps towards the rock, and

made a noise with his feet, in order to attract her attention. But she did not move; she went on with her reading, apparently sublimely indifferent to his presence.

Eric felt piqued. With that curious perversity there is in human nature, he did not want to escape now. He wanted to stay, and, if possible, make the acquaintance of the stranger.

After awhile he coughed, a make-believe, but she did not heed. She had done her best to be friendly with him; any further move must come from him.

Failing to attract her attention, he walked away toward the path that led down into the valley, kicking the loose stones about as he did so, but she did not notice him. She did not even raise her eyes.

On the edge of the descent he paused for several minutes, and began to hum a tune, turning every now and then to look at the fair picture on the rock, but she might have been cut out of marble, so motionless was she.

Then a thrush began to whistle somewhere down the wooded slope, and he began to whistle in imitation; finally, he walked away down the path till out of the range of her vision.

"I've been an awful simpleton," he said at length, throwing himself on the grassy slope. "She wanted to be friendly, and I wouldn't be. But she'll be coming this way directly. I wonder what her name is? She's certain to have a pretty name, she's so pretty herself."

Then he got up, and, with his pocket-knife, cut down a young sapling of sycamore, and began to make a whistle. It would help to while away the time until the young stranger came by. Besides, the noise he made would attract her attention, and assure her that he had not gone far away.

The whistle took a considerable while to make, for the bark clung tightly to the wood, but it was finished at length, and proved a complete success. When he put it to his lips and blew, it emitted such a shriek that all the birds in his vicinity flew away in affright, while a squirrel in a tree near him gave such a leap that it lost its foothold, and fell into the thicket with a crash.

"She's in no hurry, at any rate," Eric said, after he had performed on the whistle to his satisfaction. "I think I'll

go and look her up." Saying which he strode up the hill-side once more. On getting in sight of the rock, he came to a sudden stop. The fair stranger was gone. He rubbed his eyes to be sure she was not still sitting where he had left her. But there was no mistake about the matter. The blue-eyed fairy, or whatever she might be, had disappeared, had vanished as completely as though she had never been there.

Then he made a circuit of the hill-top, and peered down its wooded slopes in all directions. Finally, he climbed to the top of the rock, and surveyed the distant landscape, but the object of his search was nowhere visible. Away in the distance was Lindon Church, while to the left, and nearer to the hill on which he stood, was Lindon Hall, a grand and stately house, whose owner had never lived in it since it came into his possession, a dozen years ago. To the right of Lindon Church, and nestling in the shadow of a wooded hill was Priory Mere. It looked very small and insignificant in comparison with Lindon Hall. But it was not without a charm of its own, especially when flooded with the light of this June afternoon.

Eric descended the rock at length, and made his way slowly homewards. He was not in a very comfortable frame of mind. He felt piqued and disappointed. His curiosity had been aroused and had been left unsatisfied. He would have given anything almost to have known who the fair stranger was. Such a beautiful girl he had never seen before.

Nor was his irritation allayed by the reflection that had he not been so shy and stupid, his curiosity might have been satisfied.

"Uncle calls this an idiotic world," he reflected. "But I don't think the world's amiss. There may be a great many idiotic people in it, and I reckon I'm one of them."

And with this reflection he set off at a swinging trot, and in a few minutes came in sight of Priory Mere.

CHAPTER X.

A PIECE OF NEWS.

“The rabble gathered round the man of news,
And listened with their mouths wide open.
Some tell, some hear, some judge, some make it;
And he that lies most loud is most believed.”

DRYDEN.

DURING the night the weather changed to rain. Eric, looking out of his window next morning, uttered an exclamation of impatience. He had purposed going to Router height again, in the hope of meeting the stranger of the previous day. But this sudden change in the weather made that impossible. Even if the rain gave over at once and the sun began to shine, the river-path, being so much in the shadow of the trees, would remain muddy for several days, and so the hoped-for meeting would have to be indefinitely postponed.

This was a prospect that, just at that moment, was anything but inviting. His curiosity had been aroused to such a pitch that he was impatient to have it gratified. He had lain awake a good portion of the night, thinking over the events of the previous afternoon. In the even tenour of his life the occurrence was so utterly new and novel that he could not get it out of his mind, try as he would.

He had grown up so completely alone. The course of his life had been on such an even plane that any change or break in its quiet monotony plunged him into quite a state of excitement. If the stranger of the previous day had been a lad he would have been excited over the event; but being a girl—and *such* a girl—so bright and sparkling and beautiful, it is scarcely to be wondered at, perhaps, that she filled his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else.

When he got down to breakfast he found his uncle peevish and irritable. The sudden change in the weather

had brought on his old enemy—neuralgia—and, as a consequence, he was in his most pessimistic mood.

"Beastly world, this, lad!" was his greeting. "Nothing ever does go right two days in succession. If you want fine weather, it's as certain as death to rain, and if you want rain everything will go on sweltering day after day in a blaze of sunshine."

"It's very annoying it should rain to-day," Eric answered. "I was hoping we should have a spell of fine weather."

"Never hope anything, boy," was the rejoinder, "for if you do you're certain to get disappointed. In this idiotic world things go mainly by the rule of contrary."

"But one can't help hoping sometimes, uncle," Eric answered.

"And so much the worse for us that we can't," was the reply. "Hopes are ever a cheat—a mirage in the desert of life."

"Are there no exceptions to the rule?" Eric asked.

"There may be a few, but they are so few and far between as not to count in the general total. In life, boy, Philosophy is our only friend."

"Why, what will Philosophy do?"

"Teach us self-reliance; clear our minds of superstition; help us to look facts in the face; tear the mask from the face of that deceiver—Hope; lead us to expect nothing—at least, nothing good, so that we don't get disappointed; brace our nerves to face everything that happens, with nothing worse than a wry face; and soothe us at the last with the assurance of an unending sleep."

For a moment or two Eric looked at his uncle in silence, and then went on with his breakfast. He saw clearly enough that he was in one of his worst moods, and so deemed it wise not to pursue the question further.

His uncle's hard and cheerless philosophy did not affect him in any way. He was too young, too full of animal spirits to be depressed or even influenced by the pessimistic vapourings of a sour and disappointed man. A strong, healthy lad, just in his teens, with life and the world before him, can never be a pessimist. In the hearts of the young Hope sings its song every day, and will not be silenced. And though Eric himself was suffering disappointment,

Hope still lifted up its voice, and the burden of its song was, "We shall meet again."

After breakfast he hurried away to the library and settled down to his lessons with a resolute determination that did him infinite credit. He might not see the sweet-eyed stranger that day or the next, or for many a long day to come. But the echo of Hope's song was still in his heart, "We shall meet again."

By lunch time the domestic atmosphere had cleared a little, though the rain was still pouring down outside. Homer had been to Lindon on a shopping expedition, and had brought back a piece of news that interested Philip Hardman immensely. Indeed, so interested was he that he forgot his neuralgia, and was half resolved, in spite of the rain, to go to Lindon himself for confirmation and amplification of the news that Homer had brought.

"The owner of Lindon Hall had at last come to take up his residence among them."

Such was the startling piece of intelligence that interested Philip Hardman so greatly.

Homer was questioned on the subject to such an extent that he nearly lost his wits.

"You are quite sure you heard aright, Homer?" Hardman asked.

"Quite sure, sir. Why, bless you, at the stores they could talk of nothing else."

"You needn't bless me, Homer; that is but wasting words. But you heard at the stores that Major Preston had come to the Hall to reside."

"Been there a week, sir, they were saying."

"A week, Homer?" Hardman said, aghast with surprise. "And we not to have heard of it till now?"

"You see, none of us have been in to Lindon for a week or more," Homer replied.

"Quite true, quite true," was the answer. "Still, I'm greatly surprised; I never heard that he was expected."

"I don't know as 'ow he was expected till he came," Homer said.

"And has he been seen in the village?"

"Twice. The first time he drove in with his wife; the second time he walked in alone, an' called on the rector."

"Dear me," said Hardman, adjusting his spectacles and

straightening himself a little. "I wonder if he will call on me."

"I hope not," said Homer.

"Why, Homer, why?" was the quick response.

"Well, sir," said Homer, shuffling uneasily, and inwardly wishing that he had not brought the question upon himself, "you see, sir, that I don't feel as though the place did me any credit, as it were."

"Did *you* any credit," said Hardman, severely. "Explain yourself, Homer."

"Well, you see, I do the best I can," Homer replied, humbly, "but one pair of hands can't do everything as it ought to be done. An' Priory Mere ain't looking spick an' span as I would like to see it."

"Indeed, what's amiss with it? It's just as it ever has been since I can remember it."

"Except more so," Homer interposed.

Hardman laughed grimly. "Perhaps you would like it pulled down and rebuilt after the hideous modern style."

"No, sir; but I'd like it tidivated up a bit. A new verandar and a pound or two of paint 'ud work wonders."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure on it."

"Perhaps you are right, Homer. Students, philosophers, men of thought and culture, don't notice these little things that are so patent to ordinary people's eyes."

Homer's lip curled slightly, but he answered meekly enough. "If Major Preston calls I'd like 'im to see the place looking respectable. I guess he ain't so mich of a philosopher as to be above noticin' sich things."

Homer knew his master's little vanities and weaknesses, almost better than Hardman knew them himself, and for the first time for many years saw the chance of getting some very necessary repairs done, so he followed up his advantage by adding, "I expect he'll be drivin' round with his lady, callin' on all the gentry, as soon as he's got settled a bit."

Hardman looked perplexed, and fidgeted uneasily. He did not like callers, especially lady callers. "They were too inquisitive," he once explained; "they poked their noses into everything, and asked a dozen questions that bordered on impertinence."

"Major Preston has no family, I think I have heard," he said, after a pause.

"So it's said," Homer replied.

"Humph!" and Hardman took off his spectacles and began to wipe them. "Perhaps you'd better look round and see what repairs are needed," he said, after a long pause. "You needn't bother me; you can get a man or two, and get the work out of hand as quickly as possible." And he walked away without waiting for a reply.

On reaching his room he threw himself into an easy-chair and gave himself up to reflection. The advent of Major Preston was an interesting fact from many points of view. For a dozen years he had been owner of the Lindon estates, and until now scarcely one of his tenants had ever seen his face. It is true that gossip had made very free with his name, and many strange stories had been told concerning him. But whether the stories were true or false no one had any opportunity of proving.

All that was absolutely known concerning him could be summed up in very few words. He had taken the name of Preston on coming into possession of the estates. That was a provision of old Geoffery Preston's will, the previous owner. What his name had been previous to that no one knew—at least, no one in Lindon knew, though the gossips tried very hard to discover.

It was believed, however, that though he was related to old Geoffery, the relationship was a very distant one, and that no one was more surprised than the young man himself when he discovered his good fortune.

His elation, however, was considerably tempered when he got to know all the provisions of the old man's will. Giving up his own name and taking the name of Preston he did not object to. But he did object most strongly to marrying a certain Dorcas Gane, who was a shade more nearly related to the old man than himself. He had never seen Miss Gane at the time, did not know even of her existence. Moreover, he was in love with another young lady, so rumour said, and was resolved to marry her.

So he left the lawyer's office in a rage, vowing that the estates might go to the place old Geoffery had gone to for all he cared, and might there burn to a cinder, while as regarded Miss Gane, he had nothing to say against her, or

on her behalf. He did not know her. She might be as ugly as sin, or as beautiful as an angel. It mattered nothing to him. The girl he loved was more to him than all the world besides.

Perhaps he never said all this. The chances are report exaggerated. The lawyer was as silent as a sphinx on the subject, and there was no other source of information open to the gossips.

He did not see Miss Gane, however, until six months had elapsed, and the provisions of the will had to be carried out within eighteen months of the old man's death, or the estates would go. In Lindon, people said there was a "hitch" somewhere, and that old Geoffery's heir had gone abroad, and that it was very doubtful whether he would ever claim the estates.

So matters went on until old Geoffery had been dead seventeen months and a fortnight, and then news came to Lindon that the "hitch" had been got over; that the joint heirs of Lindon Estates had been married abroad; and that at the termination of their honeymoon they would come and take up their residence at Lindon Hall.

For several months Lindon was kept in a state of great excitement. Every one was consumed with curiosity to see what the new master of the Hall was like. The neighbouring gentry anticipated quite a round of balls and festivities; while the farmers had subscribed among themselves to make a handsome presentation to their new landlord directly he should appear amongst them.

One or two of the farmers had carefully written out the speeches they were to make on that occasion, and had diligently committed them to memory, and day by day in the quiet lanes and fields they rehearsed their rounded and eloquent periods with becoming passion and gesture.

But as time went on the fierce flame of their excitement died down into the white ashes of disappointment. The stack of brushwood got together for the bonfire rotted where it stood. The speeches ceased to be rehearsed and were forgotten, and Lindon settled down once more to its humdrum ways, as though its equanimity had never been disturbed.

As the months lengthened into years, and the years dragged their slow lengths along, people ceased to think

of the new owner of Lindon Hall, and so his name was rarely, if ever, mentioned. The old steward still managed the estate as he had done in its late owner's time. The servants remained on board wages, and on the whole had a good time of it, and, as far as appearances went, things might go on after the same fashion to the end of the chapter.

Coming events, however, do not always cast their shadows before. After the lapse of a dozen years, and long after people had given up expecting him, Major Preston had dropped down upon them as from the clouds, and had announced that Lindon Hall was to be his future home.

Philip Hardman was quite excited at the news. So excited, indeed, that for the moment his philosophy failed him. He had to admit to himself that he was in a very unphilosophic state of unrest. And most heartily did he wish that the weather would clear, so that he might take a walk into Lindon and gather further particulars concerning this most notable event.

When Eric heard the news his thoughts leaped at once to the occurrence of the previous day. What more likely than that the beautiful and well-dressed maiden he had seen on Rotor height was the daughter of Major Preston? Indeed, who else could she be? That she was a stranger in the village was an absolute certainty. That she was some one of note her dress and bearing plainly indicated, and that she should take a ramble to the top of Rotor height was only what might be expected, seeing it was within easy reach of the Hall, while the best views of the neighbourhood could be obtained from the summit.

He said nothing, however, to his uncle. It was his habit to make sure before committing himself to anything, but he resolved to verify his belief on the very first opportunity.

It was not without a sense of humiliation and pain that he recalled the events of the previous day. He felt that his shyness had made him rude and churlish, that he had spoken with an abruptness for which there was no excuse. What if, when they met again—if they ever did meet again—she refused to speak to him? It would be no more than he deserved, and indeed was only what he might expect.

And he ran his fingers through his hair, while a look

of perplexity swept over his face. He knew little or nothing about society ways. Etiquette was a subject that had not come within the circle of his curriculum.

"If she don't speak to me," he said to himself at length, "I'll speak to her. Yes, right or wrong, I'll speak to her."

And, having come to this resolution, he returned again to the library, and settled himself down once more to his

CHAPTER XI.

THE LORD OF LINDON.

“How poor are all hereditary honours,
Those poor possessions from another's deeds,
Unless our own just virtues form our title,
And give a sanction to our fond assumption!”
SHIRLEY.

For the next ten days Philip Hardman was kept on the *qui vive*, expecting every hour, and almost every moment, to hear the Major and Mrs. Preston announced. He hardly dared leave the house for a minute, lest he should be away when they called. Before Homer and the other members of his household, but particularly before Homer, he assumed a manner and air which were meant to imply utter indifference. He would not have them know of the anxiety that was consuming him for the world. Had he not, since he was twenty, affected the *rôle* of student and philosopher, and professed to live in a realm far away removed from the petty littlenesses of ordinary social life? Hence to betray any concern as to whether the owner of Lindon called or did not call would be inconsistent with his habit and profession. He must appear unconcerned, whatever he suffered. A Stoic troubled about the visit of a Major was not to be thought of.

And in truth Hardman was most sincerely annoyed with himself, that such a small matter should so upset him and fill his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. It had been his pride to be regarded as a recluse: a man who affected to despise all the pomps and vanities of the world, and who had given himself up to the study of occult sciences.

That he did not care for company was true—partly from temperament, and partly from a very wholesome fear that, if people knew him intimately, they might appraise him

at his true worth, while if he kept them at a distance, kept his own mouth shut, and looked wise, they might still revere him as a philosopher.

But, then, the owner of Lindon was no ordinary man, and to be slighted by so important a person, while other people basked in his smiles, would be galling in the extreme.

Of all this, however, he said nothing. To the ordinary observer he appeared wrapped in the contemplation of subjects of far greater importance.

"Do not disturb me," he would say each morning to Sarah, in the hearing of Homer, "unless it be on a matter of importance. I am very busy at present."

So he spent his days, from morning till night, among his books and fossils, and inwardly chafed that the lord of Lindon was so long in paying his respects.

Meanwhile Eric was left to do pretty much what he pleased; and as the weather had become fine again, he elected to spend most of his days out of doors. Three times he had climbed the slope of Routor Height in the hope of meeting the strange maiden who had interested him so much, but each time he was disappointed, nor did he fall in with her in his rambles in other directions.

He was inwardly chafing one bright afternoon as he stood on the river bank fishing. His tackle was considerably out of date, but he had on a few occasions landed a trout or a grayling, which Sarah had cooked for dinner, and which his uncle had immensely enjoyed, and he was not without hope that similar success might attend his efforts this afternoon.

The river was very still at this point, and overhung with trees. The wind, such as there had been earlier in the day, had died away into utter stillness. The only sound that broke the silence was the subdued plashing of water falling over the distant weir.

Suddenly a footstep near him caused him to look up with a start. The next moment a tall, handsome, though somewhat careworn looking man stood before him.

"Well, lad, what luck?" was his greeting.

"Not very much, thank you," was the reply. "The weather is too fine."

"Yes; trout won't often bite on a sunshiny afternoon like this. Just before a shower is the time."

"I don't think we shall have a shower to-day," Eric said, after a pause.

"No," the stranger answered, looking up at the deep blue of the sky that could be seen between the overhanging branches. "It really looks as if we might have a spell of fine weather now."

Then silence fell between them, while the stranger sat down on the mossy bank, and swung his feet over the placid water. Eric looked at him shyly and wondered what his face reminded him of. At first he was disposed to think that this might be the owner of Lindon; but his quiet and unobtrusive manner dispelled that idea. It was hardly conceivable, he thought, that the great Major would sit down on a river's bank to watch a boy fishing. Moreover, on second thoughts, he did not look like a Major. There was certainly nothing military about his dress; nor was there any look of fierce defiance in his eyes, such as he had always been in the habit of associating with warriors.

This was a somewhat sad-eyed gentleman, who looked as though life had gone hardly with him in the past, and who, even now, did not take the most cheerful view of life and the world.

"I suppose you live hereabouts?" the stranger remarked at length.

"Yes; I live at Priory Mere," Eric answered with a smile.

"At Priory Mere, eh? You are related, then, to Mr. Hardman?"

"Yes, he is my uncle."

"And are your parents living?"

"No, sir, they are both dead."

"Both dead! Ah!" and he drew a long sigh.

"I never remember my father," Eric said, after a pause. "He died abroad—I think in America."

"And what was his name?"

"George Strome!"

"George what?" and the stranger looked up with an interested expression in his eyes.

"Strome, sir," Eric answered, slowly.

"Not a common name, by any means," he said, after a pause, then relapsed again into silence.

Then a tug came to the end of Eric's line, and both grew

interested, but the fish shied off after nibbling for a moment at the bait, and the line hung limp again.

"I'm afraid you'll have no luck to-day," the stranger said, "though patience does get rewarded sometimes."

"I have not been very long at it, yet," Eric replied; "so I'm not going to despair."

"That's right, lad, that's right. *Nil desperandum* is a capital motto, though I cannot say for myself I always live up to it."

Eric looked at him in surprise, then questioned shyly, "I suppose you don't live very near here."

"Yes," he answered quite frankly, "I have recently come here to reside."

"For good?"

"Well, that depends," he answered, slowly. "I may not like the place, you see, or the place may not like me."

"Oh, I hope you'll like the place," Eric replied; then added, after a pause, "Though I didn't like it overmuch when I came here first."

"You didn't?"

"No. You see I had come here from London, and it was getting near winter, and I got lost the day after I came, and nearly drowned myself in Router Bog. Then I got ill and had to stay indoors all the winter, and it was awful quiet I can assure you."

"I should think so."

"But I've got used to it now, and I don't think I should like to go back and live in a noisy, dirty street again, and really there is a great deal to be seen in a place like this."

The stranger laughed.

"Oh, you may not think so at first; but after a while you get interested in lots of things. And then, you know, the Major has come here to live."

"Indeed!" and the stranger looked up with a curious twinkle in his eyes.

"You don't know him, I expect?" Eric questioned; for all his shyness had gone now, and he felt himself drawn to this sad-eyed man in a way he could not account for.

"But, of course, it is not likely you should, if you have only just come here; for the Major has been here only a fortnight, and I don't think many people have seen him yet."

"That is very probable, I should say," was the quiet answer.

"Do you know," Eric went on, with flushed face, "that when you dropped on me just now I thought you were the Major."

"Indeed!"

"I did, really, and for the moment I was ready to drop."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, the Major is a very great man. He's the lord of the manor, though I don't know exactly what that is, and then he's a warrior, and I'm always a bit afraid of people who kill folks, aren't you?"

"Not a bit."

"No? Ah, but, that's because you're grown up, perhaps. I shan't mind when I get to be a man. And then, you see, I have never seen a Major. Perhaps they are not a bad sort when you get to know them."

"No; I should fancy they are much like other men."

"Have you ever seen a Major?"

"Oh, yes, dozens of them."

"And are they awful fierce people?"

The stranger laughed again, then added, "Some of them are fierce enough, especially if you get to close quarters with them."

"I guess they are," Eric said, with a gasp. Then he remained silent for awhile, while the stranger watched him curiously.

"Do you know," Eric said, at length, "I knew you were not the Major as soon as I looked into your eyes."

"You did?"

"Yes. You do not look at all fierce."

"Is that so?"

"And when you sat down there on the bank, that settled the matter."

"Why so?"

Eric laughed. "Do you think," he said, "that the Lord of Lindon would sit here, with his feet dangling over the river, talking to a boy?"

"Well, really, I don't see any particular reason why he shouldn't."

"You don't; then I fancy you don't know very much about big folks."

"That is true enough," the stranger answered, with a smile. "Still, I think that even the Lord of Lindon, as you call him, might sit here and talk to you and enjoy it very much."

"I should very much like to see him do it," Eric said, with an incredulous laugh, and then moved two or three paces farther up the river. After a few minutes he came back again, and the stranger resumed the conversation.

"Look here—what did you say your name was?"

"Eric, sir."

"Eric Strome! You might be a young Russian. Well, look here, Eric; suppose I were to tell you that I am Major Preston, what would you say?"

"Well, I should say I am not to be caught with chaff," he answered, readily.

"And you would not believe me?"

"Not likely."

"Why not?"

The boy laughed. "Do you think you look like a Major?" he questioned.

"Well, perhaps not," was the reply. "Yet I am the Major all the same."

Eric blushed to the roots of his hair.

"No," he said, "you are only fooling me."

"Nay, Eric, I am telling you the sober truth," he answered, kindly.

The lad's lip trembled. "I wish you had told me before," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I shouldn't have made such a simpleton of myself then." And his eyes filled.

"Nay, boy, don't let it trouble you; you have not said a word that you need regret."

"I don't know," he faltered. "I seem to be constantly doing the wrong thing. A week ago I met a stranger on Router Height, and I was shy, and, I fear, rude, and would say nothing. And now I meet you, and I'm not shy a bit, and I say a great deal too much."

"Not a bit of it. Though I admit you have ground for complaint. I ought to have told you sooner, but the temptation was too strong."

"And you are not angry with me?"

"Not a bit. I'm very pleased with you."

"And I'm——"

Then he stopped abruptly.

"You're what?"

"Oh, never mind." And his neck and face became crimson.

"Oh, yes, I do mind," laughed the Major; "so you'd better out with it."

"And you'll not be vexed?"

"Not I."

"Well, I was going to say I'm awfully pleased with you."

"Then we'll shake hands," said the Major, laughing, and he stretched out his hand, which Eric eagerly grasped.

"Now," said the Major, getting up from his seat, "come with me to the Hall, and I'll find you some better fishing tackle than that, and some day I'll show you how to whip the stream in proper fashion."

The lad's eyes sparkled. To go to Lindon Hall in the company of the Major himself, with the promise of fishing tackle of the newest style at the end of it, seemed to him almost like a page out of the "Arabian Nights."

"You mean it?" he said, eagerly.

"Of course I mean it," was the reply. "Now, stick that rod into the bank—nobody will steal it; and besides, there may be a trout at the end of the line by the time you return."

Eric did as he was told, and a few minutes later he and the Major walked away side by side. He was too excited to talk much. The prospect of seeing the inside of Lindon Hall, and of being introduced to the Major's wife and daughter, almost turned his head. In his wildest dreams he had never anticipated such a thing.

That the sprightly fairy of Rotor Height was the Major's daughter he did not doubt for a single moment, and as he drew near the stately hall he thrilled almost to the finger-tips at the prospect of meeting her again. He had resolved to apologise for his rudeness of the previous week, and to ask her to forgive him for his discourteous behaviour. That she would do so he had no doubt. Perhaps she would let him be her friend.

When Eric passed through the doorway into the great

hall he saw nothing for several seconds. Across the tessellated floor, done in rich mosaic, he walked with downcast eyes, and entered a room, the walls of which were adorned with guns, spears, swords, pieces of armour, spurs, fishing-rods, and a dozen other things, the names of which he did not know.

"Now, Eric," said the Major, placing before him several rods. "Take your choice, and don't be afraid of selecting the best you can find," and he smiled good-naturedly while the lad made his choice.

"Oh, you are good, and I do thank you very much," Eric said, when he had satisfied himself. "I never expected such good fortune."

"I thought I should be able to please you," the Major said, laughing. "Now you had better be off home as quickly as possible, or your uncle will wonder what has become of you."

"I had forgotten all about the time," Eric said, with a blush. "But if I'm late he'll forgive me when he knows."

"You think he will, do you?"

"Oh, yes. But won't he be surprised just?"

"Surprised at what?"

"Oh, everything. Do you know I can hardly believe it myself yet. Won't it be funny if I should wake up and find it all a dream?"

"It would be very funny, indeed," the Major said, leading the way back into the hall.

"I don't think it is a dream," Eric said, glancing swiftly around him and up at the stained-glass roof. "I think it is very real and very beautiful." Then he started as the rustle of a dress fell on his ears, and a soft footfall sounded on the stairs behind him.

CHAPTER XII.

A PLEASANT VISIT.

“Never did poesy appear
So full of heaven to me, as when
I saw how it would pierce through pride and fear
To the lives of coarsest men !
I thought these men will carry hence
Promptings their former life above,
And something of a finer reverence
For beauty, truth, and love.”

J. R. LOWELL.

ERIC returned to Priory Mere with somewhat mixed feelings. He had seen the Major, seen the inside of Lindon Hall, seen Mrs. Preston, though only for a moment, as she descended the broad stairs on her way to the dining-room, and had received marks of favour from the Lord of Lindon almost sufficient to turn his brain. And yet he was not completely satisfied. Through all his elation there ran a thread of disappointment. He almost fancied he would have given all the rest for a sight of the fairy of Router Height. But it was not to be.

He did not loiter on his way home, though he was strongly tempted to do so. He wanted time to collect his thoughts, to shape into something like sequence the events of the afternoon. At present his head was in a whirl, and he knew it would be next to impossible to give his uncle a detailed account of what had happened.

There was no help for it, however. Their usual dinner hour was already passed. There was not even time to go round by the river and look at his line.

Philip Hardman was pacing his library in a state of intense irritation when Eric entered. Another day had gone, and the Major had not called to see him ; that of

itself was sufficient to make him peevish, if there had been no other cause. But to be kept waiting for dinner a full half-hour beyond his usual time, and to be tortured at the same time with his old enemy, neuralgia, was simply maddening.

"Eric," he snarled, as soon as the lad entered, "what is the meaning of this? Where have you been? What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I've been to Lindon Hall with the Major," Eric answered, quietly.

Hardman started as though he had been shot; then dropped into a chair, and literally gasped.

"What is that I hear?" he said, as soon as he had recovered himself. "You've been to Lindon Hall?"

"Yes, uncle."

"And with the Major?"

"Yes."

Hardman pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow.

"You surprise me," he said, all the anger gone from his voice.

"And he gave me this fishing-rod. Isn't it a beauty?"

"Gave it you?"

"Yes; he came upon me when I was fishing, and really he didn't seem a bit like a major. He is so quiet and gentle, and his eyes are not a bit fierce."

"And you knew it was he?"

"Not at the first. He just sat down, as a farmer might, and swung his feet over the river, and chatted with me."

"Astonishing."

"Then afterwards, when we had got quite friendly, he told me who he was, and took me with him to the Hall, and gave me this."

"Eric, let us go to dinner, and you can tell me all the story, from beginning to end. I can hardly realise it yet."

During the rest of the evening Philip Hardman was in a state of mind more unphilosophic than usual, and by morning a new idea struck him, which he proceeded to act upon without unnecessary delay.

"Homer," he said, as soon as breakfast was over, "I wish you to get out the brougham at once."

"Yes, sir," said Homer, much wondering what was in the wind.

"I fear I have been very remiss," Hardman said, with a frown. "Very remiss, indeed."

"About the verandar, sir?"

"About the verandah, no!" he answered, with undisguised contempt. "Do you think I have nothing else to engage my attention?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," Homer answered, humbly; "only it's getting done at last."

Hardman smiled. Then answered, after a pause, "I think you told me yesterday or the day before that Major Preston had come to take up his residence at Lindon Hall."

"Yesterday or the day before?" said Homer, raising his eyebrows. "Why, it must be nearly a fortnight ago."

"No, surely not."

"I'm certain on it, sir."

"Dear me. How these little things escape one's thoughts when engaged on the deeper problems of science and philosophy."

Homer drew down his mouth at the corners.

"If it is so long since the Major came here," went on Hardman, "he will wonder at my remissness."

"Very likely," said Homer.

"I am not one of his tenants, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"I am a landowner myself, and an old resident. I ought to have called and left my card, if nothing else."

"Very likely, sir. I don't understand such things."

"Of course, of course. And my more serious studies make me forgetful of such things. But get out the brougham at once, Homer."

"Yes, sir," and Homer walked away with a curious smile wreathing his honest face.

"Talk about the cant o' religion," he muttered to himself, as soon as he reached the stables, "I wonder what his is the cant of? He thinks folks can't see through sich vanities. He must be amazin' blind. But his heart ain't bad, anyhow, so I oughtn't to grumble."

Hardman's visit to the Major was satisfactory from every point of view. His welcome was genial and hearty.

without ostentation, while the conversation took a turn that suited him exactly.

"You are a philosopher, I hear," said the Major, "versed in all sorts of abstruse questions and occult sciences."

Hardman smiled and wiped his glasses. "A mere dabbler, Major—a mere dabbler; a child playing with the foam of the waves, while the mighty deep lies all beyond him."

"Ah! that's the way you learned people talk," the Major said, with a laugh. "You are always so dreadfully modest."

"Modesty becomes the student," Hardman answered, with downcast eyes. "We know so little in comparison with what there is to be known, that we must needs be humble."

"But what of us poor beggars who know nothing of your brain-raking philosophies; I suppose you think we never ought to open our mouths at all?"

"Every man in his own order," said Hardman.

"What, Scripture? Lane, the rector, tells me you don't believe in the Bible."

"I believe in truth, Major, whether found in the Bible, or in Shakespeare, or the Koran, or anywhere else."

"Very well said. But how do you know what is truth?"

"Ah! Major, that opens up too wide a field, I fear, for us to enter upon this morning."

The Major laughed. "Quite right, Mr. Hardman," he said. "It would be a pity for you to waste your philosophic lore or skill on a man of my stamp. I'm no student. The little I have learnt has been by experience."

"You've been a great traveller?" said Hardman.

"Scarcely that," answered the Major. "Though I've lived abroad chiefly during the last dozen years."

"I sometimes think I should like to travel," said Hardman; "but somehow, when it gets to the point of starting off, I always shrink from it, with the result that I have never yet been out of my own country."

"Excuse me for saying so," said the Major, smiling, "but I think that is a mistake. A man who spends all his life in one place is apt to get insular and prejudiced."

"You think so?"

"Well, that is my impression. I may be mistaken, of course. But I think it does any man good to visit other lands, to see how other peoples live and work. The world is bigger than many people imagine it."

"Doubtless you are right, Major, doubtless you are right," Hardman observed, bringing the tips of his fingers together, and looking interested. "I really think I shall have to make the effort some day. What country would you recommend one to visit now, as a start?"

The Major laughed. "Well, really," he said, "that is a somewhat difficult question to answer. A very great deal depends on the tastes of the individual. The man, for instance, who is fond of art, should by all means visit Italy. If he be a lover of Nature, then Norway or Switzerland will furnish him with everything he can desire. If he be a student of human nature, let him, after he has visited the principal Continental cities, run across to Algiers, and Constantine, and Cairo, all within easy distance; and a few months so spent will be a revelation to him, as well as an education."

"You quite interest me," said Hardman, rubbing his hands; "quite interest me. Perhaps I have buried myself too much among my books and fossils, and such studies as you name I have sadly neglected."

"But art and science often go hand in hand," said the Major.

"Yes; I believe that is so," was the reply; "but in my case I fear it has not been so. Not that I am not fond of art; but my opportunities of studying it have been few."

"Then spend a few months in Florence, by all means, the city of flowers and the flower of cities. Ah, Mr. Hardman, you have a treat in store."

"You think so, Major?"

"If you go, of course. To me Florence is one of the most delightful of cities. It is beautiful for situation, and it is crammed full of beautiful things."

"Tell me of them," said Hardman, eagerly.

"Nay," said the Major, laughing, "that is impossible. I am not an artist. I cannot paint word-pictures; besides, no words can paint Florence."

"Is it so beautiful?" said Hardman, clasping his hands.

"To the artist it is; to others but a quaint, bustling, old-world city. We see what we take with us, Mr. Hardman—the power of seeing."

"Yes, yes, a very fine thought that, Major, and finely expressed by Goethe."

"Did you ever read Browning's 'Old Pictures in Florence'?" asked the Major, after a pause.

"Let me see," Hardman answered, uneasily. "I think I must have done so; but in this age of books, Major, it is difficult to remember what one has read."

"Much that we read is not worth remembering," the Major answered. "We read for recreation as well as for information."

"I cannot say I do," said Hardman, seriously; feeling that he had scored a point by that remark. "Life is too short, Major, to waste over trifles. If a man wishes to accomplish anything in the domain of science or philosophy, he must not fritter away his time over worthless books."

"A book that helps you to pass a pleasant hour, that calls away your thoughts from the gnawing cares of life, though it may teach you nothing, is not worthless," said the Major.

"Ah! my deeper studies help me to do all that," said Hardman, with a smile. "In my study, wrapped in contemplation, there is no care in life, nor outside world to remember."

"Happy man!" laughed the Major, throwing back his head. "I think you have no need to go to Florence."

Hardman looked puzzled for a moment. Then answered with great seriousness: "Not for pleasure merely would I go and see with my own eyes its treasures of art; but that my thoughts might be quickened, my knowledge of art increased, my taste improved."

"Exactly," said the Major drily. "Florence will quicken thought in many ways. I spoke of Browning just now. He got a thought out of Giotto's great bell tower, as well as out of the beautiful statuary in the galleries. Listen:"

And the Major took up a volume lying on the table and read—

“Growth came when, looking your last on them all,
 You turned your eyes inwardly one fine day
 And cried with a start—What if we so small
 Be greater and grander the while than they?
 Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?
 In both, of such lower types are we,
 Precisely because of our wider nature;
 For time, theirs—ours, for eternity.

“To-day’s brief passion limits their range;
 It seethes with the morrow for us and more,
 They are perfect—how else? They shall never change;
 We are faulty—why not? We have time in store.
 The Artificer’s hand is not arrested,
 With us, we are rough-hewn, no-wise polished;
 They stand for our copy, and once invested
 With all they can teach we shall see them abolished.

“’Tis a life-long toil till our lump be leaven.
 The better! What’s come to perfection perishes,
 Things learned on earth we shall practise in heaven,
 Works done less rapidly Art most cherishes,
 Thyself shall afford the example, Giotto!
 Thy one work, not to decrease or diminish,
 Done at a stroke was just (was it not?) ‘O!’
 Thy great Campanile is still to finish.”

Hardman’s small eyes twinkled as the Major quietly closed the book and laid it on the table. He saw the chance—or thought he did—of scoring another point. He had a feeling that he had betrayed too much ignorance hitherto in his conversation with the Major. If possible, he must recover any ground he had lost. He must assume at once the superior position of the student and philosopher.

He had really understood very little of what the Major had read. The thought of the poet, though simple enough, and simply expressed, was beyond him. One line, however, did fasten itself upon his memory:—

“Things learned on earth we shall practise in heaven.”

“Your poet,” he said slowly, wiping his spectacles, “is like all the rest of his class—a mere dreamer, unpractical, and unscientific. Poetry it may be, but not truth. Science cares nothing for fancies; it demands facts. To talk about

what we learn on earth we shall practise in heaven is nursery twaddle. All the heaven or hell we shall ever know is here, and now; your hereafter may suit poets and parsons, but men of culture, Major, have out-grown such superstition."

The Major smiled, then answered quietly: "If that be so then I am thankful I am not a man of culture."

"But surely, Major——"

"Yes, surely, Mr. Hardman."

"You surprise me."

"You shouldn't be surprised. I am no saint, nor dreamer. The sins of my life bear me company, and will continue to do so. Yet the prospect of a hereafter is full of hope. In the long roll of ages yonder one may redeem in some measure the mistakes of the past. Even the thought of suffering does not appall me, since, like fire, it shall burn up the dross. Nay, Mr. Hardman, you can keep your philosophy. I am but a plain man, and the old superstition, if you like to call it so, is truth to me."

"You said nothing of this to Eric, I hope?"

"Nothing."

"Then please do not. I am letting him grow up unbiassed. When he is older he must choose for himself."

"I will respect your scruple." And the Major rose from his chair.

"And I will respect your opinions," said Mr. Hardman, condescendingly. "I do not pose as an iconoclast. If your religion is of any comfort to you, I have no wish to destroy it. But I have reached, figuratively, a land beyond." And he rubbed his hands complacently.

The Major smiled, and held out his hand.

"I am delighted to have made your acquaintance," said Hardman, grasping the Major's hand firmly. "Delighted. I hope I shall see you soon at Priory Mere." And, with a polite bow, he walked out of the room with great dignity.

CHAPTER XIII.

BY LINDON CHURCH.

"How sweet and solemn, all alone, ~
With reverend steps from stone to stone,
In a small village churchyard lying,
O'er intervening flowers to move!
And as we read the names unknown
Of young and old to judgments gone,
And hear in the calm air above
Time onwards softly flying,
To meditate in Christian love
Upon the dead and dying!"

JOHN WILSON.

DURING the following week Eric got his heart's desire. His uncle had gone to Yarncaster to attend a meeting of the local antiquarians, and as he had left no instructions as to lessons, Eric felt himself justified in taking holiday and avoiding the library altogether. It was a glorious July day, a little too warm for violent exercise; but delightful for those who had sufficient leisure to take things easily.

After Homer and his uncle had driven away, he stood for some time on the doorstep undecided as to what he should do with himself. Not that so many courses were open to him. For, after all, life had very little of change or variety as far as he was concerned. Year after year he had been shut up with three elderly people, with nothing to break the quiet monotony. Birthdays, Christmas Days, Easter Days, and even Sundays received no recognition at Priory Mere, as far as he and his uncle were concerned. In the kitchen the Sabbath was duly observed. On that day Homer and Sarah and Peggy always donned their best attire, and, after an unusually early dinner had been

served, sauntered away together into the village. It was their weekly holiday, his uncle had explained, and with that explanation he was content.

So the years had slipped away without any ups or downs. Little worries there had been, and little pleasures, but they quickly passed and were as quickly forgotten. On the whole, he was fairly well satisfied, for the simple reason he had never known anything better. Now and then, when he had gone with his uncle to Yarncaster or Ribblesford, he had caught glimpses of a life more busy and exciting than his own. But the remembrance of his early childhood generally brought reconciliation. There might be no excitement at Priory Mere or change of company, but there was, at least, freedom from anxiety and care.

Occasionally a longing had crept into his heart for other companionships and friendships than those he had known. To have people his own age around him would surely be pleasanter than to be always in the company of grown people. Not that he had fault to find with any one at Priory Mere. His uncle might be gloomy and cynical, and very frequently cross, but he was never really unkind, while occasionally he revealed a generosity that a stranger would never suspect. And as for the rest—well, they could scarcely be improved upon. Sarah was a real mother to him, and Homer a friend in a thousand, constant as the daylight and generous as the sun; nor was Peggy much behind the others in her efforts to please.

Still, they were not all his heart desired. There was still a lack, though he could not clearly define, even to himself, what it was. On the morning in question he saw his uncle and Homer drive away with a little pang of discontent. Why could not he have been taken as well? In the lumbering landau there was room for half-a-dozen, and the horses were never over-worked, so they need not be considered. A day at Yarncaster would be a delightful change from the drowsy monotony of Priory Mere. Nor would he be in the way. His uncle might look wise among the antiquarians, while he and Homer climbed up to the park that crowned the hill, and got a view of the shining sea and a sight of the Westmoreland Hills lifting up their

summits to the sky. And then there was the Castle. His uncle had never taken him through it yet, though he had often promised to do so.

"I think he might have taken me," he said to himself, as he looked along the drive after the carriage had disappeared. "It would have been a change, if nothing else," and he flung his cap into the air, and caught it on the point of his toe; then flung it a second time and caught it on his head. After which he pushed his hands into his pockets and marched away. Along the carriage drive he sauntered, whistling as he went; out into the Ribblesford highway, then turned to the left and made for Lindon.

He had no particular object in view, so he sauntered aimlessly along, stopping now and then to whittle a stick or to fling a stone at a bird perched on the branch of a tree. Boys always fling stones at birds whenever they have the opportunity. I don't know why they do it—they don't know themselves. Perhaps it is instinct—a streak of savagery, a desire to kill, still running through their blood. Perhaps it is not that at all; for who ever knew a boy that killed a bird with a stone? If they thought there was any danger of the songster being hurt, perhaps they would withhold their hand. Is it the certainty of missing that makes them so reckless? We leave the question unanswered. Eric shied a dozen stones at as many birds between Priory Mere gates and the church, and with the usual result, no bird seemed conscious of any attempt upon its life.

At the churchyard gate he paused for several seconds, debating with himself whether or not he should enter. Hitherto he had always avoided the churchyard. It was a place, he had been told, where they buried people. And as no friend of his slept beneath the soft green turf, and no sacred association hovered round the spot, he had always passed it by with a slightly quickened step. The hope that thrilled other hearts, and made the grave seem but the dark doorway to life and immortality, had not touched him yet. Once only had his uncle spoken to him of his mother, and then he had said "she was dead, lost, swallowed up in eternal silence."

He had never wished his uncle to speak on the subject

again. Nor had he ever betrayed any desire to do so. The thought was so terrible that he put it aside. Yet he knew it had fixed itself in his heart. Death was the end. That was the first article in the creed he was unconsciously shaping for himself. The churchyard was a place of bones and skulls, and so a place to be avoided.

Yet, as he stood outside the gate this glorious summer morning, other feelings took possession of him. The summer breeze that stirred the grass on the green hillocks came to him laden with the perfume of lilacs and June roses and mignonette. Then suddenly from among the graves a lark rose up with a song that had no touch of sadness in it, and higher and still higher into the still air it rose, flooding the silence of the graveyard with its song, and tempting other tiny throats to join in the chorus.

Eric lifted his head for a moment and listened, then marched boldly forward, pushed open the gate, and entered. He soon forgot himself in reading the epitaphs on the various tombstones—some of them quaint, some of them sad, some humorous, many of them utterly meaningless.

The old flat slabs interested him most—the spelling was so original and so varied, the grammar so defiant of recognised standards, the poetry so grotesque. Yet in nearly every epitaph a hope was breathed, a faith acknowledged to which he was an entire stranger. What did the constant recurrence of such words as “soul” and resurrection” and “Heaven” mean? True, he had met with them before in his reading, and had puzzled over them, until his uncle had explained that different people had different beliefs, and different nations had different religions; that it was inevitable people should believe something; that the more ignorant people were the more silly and impossible were their beliefs; that to the learned all religions were about of equal value. But what that value was he must find out for himself when he got to be a man.

Yet to-day, as he wandered among the graves, he discovered that his uncle's explanation did not tally with the testimony of the tombstones. He was clear-sighted enough to see that, as far as Lindon was concerned, for hundreds of years, all the people seemed to hold the same belief.

There was a uniformity of faith running through all the epitaphs, ancient and modern.

He would inquire of his uncle again. There was a riddle here that wanted explaining, not that he deemed it a matter of very much importance, only riddles were tantalising things until one got hold of the answer.

Then suddenly he started and blushed—he discovered he was not alone. Back of the chancel was a simple cross of white marble, and kneeling before it was a young girl, busily engaged in gathering out the weeds from among the flowers that adorned the grave.

Her back was towards him, but the wealth of hair that fell over her shoulders and swayed gently in the summer wind and shone in the sunlight, reminded him of the stranger he had met on Router Height, and whom for weeks he had been longing to see.

He had been shy and foolish then. He was shy still, but he was resolute. If his chance had come at last he was not going to fling it away. He did not pause to debate the question, but marched straight away to the grave on which she knelt.

She looked up with a start when she heard his footstep, and turning her head, their eyes met in a quick glance of recognition.

"Good morning, Miss Preston," he said, raising his cap, and blushing to the roots of his hair. "I hope I don't intrude."

"Oh, no, not at all," she answered, with a smile. "But why do you call me Miss Preston?"

"Because—you are Miss Preston, are you not?" he said, blushing more deeply than ever.

"No," she answered, still smiling. "I cannot lay claim to that distinction."

"And they are not your parents?"

"Who?"

"The Major and his wife?"

"No; my parents are both dead."

"Both dead?"

"Yes; this is my mother's grave."

Eric's eyes fell, and his lips trembled a little. Then he raised his head and read the inscription.

" IN MEMORY OF
 MARY,
 THE BELOVED WIFE OF THE
 REV. JOHN LEICESTER,
 • Who died May 10, 18—,
 AGED TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS.
 'Gone Home.' "

The maiden rose from her knees and sat on a neighbouring hillock while he read, and when he had finished he turned his head, and their eyes met again.

"And so your name is Leicester?" he said, with a shade of disappointment in his voice.

"Yes," she answered, slowly; "Claire Leicester is my name."

"And you have lived in Lindon always?" he questioned.

"Oh, no," she replied, quickly; "I've only been here about a month."

"I thought you were a stranger when I first saw you on Routor Height," he said.

"Nay," she said, laughing, "I think you were the stranger."

"I own I was very rude," he said, with averted eyes; "and I've been very sorry ever since. Do you know, I've climbed to the top of Routor Height many times since then in the hope of meeting you."

"How very strange," she laughed.

"Very strange?" he questioned.

"Yes, very," she said, still laughing. "I should have thought that if you concluded I was anywhere about you would have got as far away as possible."

"Why should you think that?" he said, biting his lip.

"Because you seemed so terribly frightened when you saw me perched on the rocks on Routor Height."

"No, I was not frightened," he answered, uneasily. "But, you see, I've never been used to strangers, and that makes all the difference."

"Does it?" she said, archly.

"Well, I think so," he replied. "Don't you think so?"

"Well, I hardly know," she said, after a pause. "I've been used to strangers always."

"Then you will find it very quiet in Lindon," he said.

"Yes, I do find it very quiet," she answered. "But I shall be going away to school again after awhile."

"When?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly, but I don't think until next year."

"Oh, I am glad."

"Glad I'm going to school?"

"No; glad you are not going till next year."

She burst out laughing at that. Then asked, after a pause, "Why? What difference will it make to you?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said, shifting uneasily, and blushing again. "Only I don't want you to go away again just as I am beginning to know you."

"Well, you are funny," she said, after a pause. "And yet, do you know, I rather like you."

"Do you?" he said, his face brightening. "I'm glad of that, for I like you dreadfully. I did from the very first."

"Then why did you run away from me?"

"Oh, but I came back again after a few minutes, but you had gone."

"What a pity!" she said, with mock seriousness.

"So I thought," he answered gravely, not understanding her banter. "But I'm glad we've met again."

"So am I," she said, trying her best to keep her face straight. "You are so fresh and original that really——"

"I don't think I quite understand you," he interposed.

"No?" she questioned.

"No, I don't think I do. You see, I've never been used to girls."

"Oh, what a pity. But girls are awfully jolly when you get to know them."

"Yes, I should think so."

"But they take a dreadful deal of knowing."

"Do they?"

"Yes. You have no idea if you haven't been used to them."

"Do you take a great deal of knowing?" he asked, after a pause.

"Well, that all depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On two things. First, whether I like people, and, second, whether they like me."

"Oh, then I shall know you directly," he said.

"How so?" she asked.

"Because you told me just now that you liked me, and I know that I like you."

For a moment she looked at him, her eyes brimful of merriment, then burst into a peal of laughter. Then her laughter suddenly ceased, and her face became thoughtful and grave.

"Let us walk away from here," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"This is my mother's grave," she answered. "I forgot myself when I laughed."

He did not speak, but he followed her as she threaded her way among the graves, until she reached the path, then he walked by her side out into the highway.

"Do you live in Lindon?" he questioned, when the gate clicked behind them.

"I live at Lindon Hall," she answered.

"At the Hall," he said, in astonishment.

"Yes; why not?"

"But you said just now that the Major was not your father."

"That is true," she answered. "But my mother was distantly related to Mrs. Preston. A second cousin, I think. Anyhow, when my father died they adopted me, and I have lived with them ever since."

"Then you are as good as their daughter?" he said, with a laugh.

"Are you as good as Mr. Hardman's son?" she said, laughing back at him.

"Then you know who I am?" he said, in tones of surprise.

"Of course I know. I've known nearly ever since I've been here."

"Did you know when we met on Router Height?"

"Yes, I knew then."

"Well, you are funny."

"And so are you; so now we are quits."

The next moment the clock in the old tower just above them began to strike the hour of twelve. Claire started and held out her hand. "I ought to have been home by this," she said.

"But may we not meet again?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes, some time," she said, drawing her hand from his and rushing away.

"Where? When?" he called.

"To-morrow, by Lindon Church, when the clock strikes four," she laughingly answered back. The next moment she had turned a bend in the road and was out of sight.

CHAPTER XIV.

DREAMS AND REALITIES.

"She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament,
Her eyes as stars of twilight fair;
Like twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her, drawn
From May-time and the cheerful dawn."

WORDSWORTH.

LIFE seemed to Eric after that day quite a different thing. It was fuller, richer, more harmonious and complete. The something, without knowing what, which for years he had been longing for, had at last come to him. He had found a companion and friend of his own age. Claire seemed the complement of his own imperfect life. He could never be lonely again if she were near; she supplied all his lack, and rounded his existence into a perfect whole.

So ran his dream in those early days, and if the dream was all delusion the fault was not his. Claire, with her brightness and mirth and vivacity, was just the friend he needed. She thawed him as the sun thaws ice; roused him out of himself, provoked him to laughter by her pleasantries, touched into activity every generous impulse, and made the world and life seem a thousand times more beautiful than ever they had appeared before.

True to her promise, she stood in the shadow of Lindon Church when the clock struck four the following afternoon. Eric came shyly round the corner, half wondering, half fearing. But when she turned her large blue eyes full upon him, all his shyness vanished, and he greeted her by her Christian name.

"You'll not mind me calling you Claire, will you?" he

said, a moment later, as though not quite certain whether their brief acquaintance justified him in doing so or not.

"Of course I don't mind you calling me Claire," she answered, brightly; "what else would you call me?"

"I wouldn't call you anything else," he said; "I think Claire suits you exactly."

"Uncle says it's more like a boy's name than a girl's," she said, with a little pout.

"Do you call the Major your uncle?" he asked.

"Always! And now what do you think?"

"I don't know. What is it?"

"Well, I want you to take me to Priory Mere, and show me the ghosts, and the fossils, and the recluse, and all the other funny things there are to be seen."

For a moment he looked at her and laughed. "Who's been cramming you?" he asked at length.

"Nobody," she said; "only everybody says it is a funny old place."

"Well, I fancy it is," he said, thoughtfully, "so come along."

It did not take them long to reach Priory Mere, for Claire was curious to see what the inside was like, and so was in no humour to loiter on the road. Philip Hardman looked up with a start, and a little exclamation of surprise when they entered.

Eric started also, for he did not know that his uncle was in the room, Peggy having informed him that she thought he was out.

"I beg your pardon, uncle," Eric said, uneasily, "but this is Claire."

But Hardman did not appear to notice him. He was looking at the girl with a fixed and wondering expression, as though he was not quite certain his eyes were not deceiving him.

Claire, flushed and excited, drew back at length from his steady gaze and dropped her eyes to the floor.

Then Hardman turned to Eric. "I beg your pardon," he said, "but I think you were saying something just now."

"I simply said, uncle, that this is Claire," he said, moving a step closer to his companion.

"Claire?" Hardman questioned. "Claire! I do not think I quite understand."

"Claire Leicester, uncle, the Major's niece," Eric interposed quickly.

Hardman was alert in a moment. "The Major's niece. Ah!" he said, his face brightening, "delighted to see you, Miss—Miss—what did you say, Eric?"

"Leicester, uncle."

"Leicester?" and he took her hand slowly in his and held it, while he scanned her bonny face with searching eyes.

"Leicester," he muttered half to himself; and his eyes wandered away to a picture on the wall, then back again to the living face before him.

"Was your mother——" then he paused abruptly.

"My mother is dead," Claire answered, much wondering at the man's strange behaviour.

"Yes, dead," he said, and he fixed his eyes again on the picture on the wall.

"And your father?" he questioned.

"My father was a clerygman," she answered.

"And is he living?"

"No, sir, he is dead also."

"His name was John Leicester," he said.

"Yes."

"Ah, then, you are Mary's child. Yes, yes, I might have known it without asking all these questions. You have her eyes, her wealth of hair, she lives again in you. Child, for her sake, not for your father's; no, not for your father's, but for her sake you are welcome to Priory Mere."

Eric listened in astonishment, and looked first at one and then at the other, utterly unable to comprehend the little drama. Claire was scarcely less astonished, though she managed to hide her feelings completely. She might be like her mother in appearance, but she possessed a firmness and dignity her mother never possessed.

"Thank you," she said at length, drawing away her hand. "I wanted to see your curiosities."

"I have not many," he said, "not many; but such as I have you are welcome to see. Eric will show you over the place; he will be pleased to so."

Of Eric's pleasure there could be no doubt. He was in

a seventh heaven of delight. After seeing all there was to be seen indoors, they rambled away into the orchard, and then into the garden, and from thence up into the plantation.

Homer, who was busy at work in the garden, looked after them and smiled.

"Bless their hearts," he said to himself, "they be a bonny couple, an' no mistake. What a difference young things do make about the place to be sure. A place without childer is like a flower-garden without any flowers in it."

"There," he said, as a peal of merry laughter echoed down from the plantation, "bless 'em, they be like young kittens, they can't help bein' 'appy, and the good Lord meant 'em to be, that's a dead sartinty. But ain't she a bonny flower? Talk about roses a-blooming in the garden, they ain't in it when she's about. If I was only a poet now, as my mother meant me to be, I could write a stanza on a couple like them."

And Homer settled down to his work again, and wondered, as he had done many times before, why nature had left him without the talent his mother had so much desired.

How swiftly that summer passed away. To Eric it was like a blissful dream. Nearly every day he and Claire met each other, and rambled at their will over all the country side. They loitered by the river in the shadow of the trees, and sat on the rocks above the noisy weir. They climbed Router Height times without number, and read aloud to each other perched on its crown. They joined the reapers in the field when harvest came, and went nutting together in the browning woods.

Sometimes Claire remained to dinner at Priory Mere, and sometimes Eric joined the family at the Hall, and no one raised any objection to the young people being so much together.

Indeed, the Major rather encouraged the intimacy than otherwise. He had evidently taken a great fancy to Eric, and would often keep him at the Hall much against the boy's wish.

"I'll make it all right with your uncle," he would say, "so make yourself easy."

What Hardman thought of the matter did not transpire.

He did not grow more communicative as time passed on, and whether Claire's visits to Priory Mere gave him more pleasure or pain it was hard to say. He welcomed her in the most hearty fashion when she came, but her visits were always followed by long fits of abstraction. Hours after she had gone Eric would find him sitting in his room with his eyes fixed on the portrait of Claire's mother.

Of the little romance and tragedy that had saddened his life the boy knew nothing, for he never alluded to the matter under any circumstances. But the wound had not healed, though so many years had passed away. Despite the man's little vanities and self-deceptions, there were depths of feeling in his nature undreamed of by those who surrounded him from day to day. The woman he had loved in the years gone by, though she was dead and dust, still held her place in his heart. True, time had dulled the keen edge of his disappointment and loss, and in some measure had reconciled him to his lonely lot. But time had never filled the gap that she had made, for no other woman could take her place.

And now her child, the image of herself, had touched every slumbering memory into wakefulness, had wiped the mist from the clouded mirror, wherein was reflected the painful past, and had compelled him to live over again those painful periods that he would willingly have buried and forgotten.

And yet, in spite of the pain, there was a certain pleasure in having Claire in the house. Her laughter touched his heart like far-off music, and in the light of her dancing eyes he almost felt himself young again.

So she came and went almost at will during that brief summer-time, and Eric's education was in danger of being neglected altogether in consequence. Once or twice his uncle had remonstrated with him.

But his reply was, "It won't be long, uncle. Claire goes away to school in January, and I'll work hard enough then."

"But don't you see, Eric, you are forgetting all that you have learnt."

"Not all, uncle. Besides, I couldn't fix my thoughts on any book just now."

"And why not?"

"Well, you see, I should be thinking of Claire."

"But that is very silly."

"Is it? I don't know. You see, I never had a young companion before, and that makes all the difference, I expect."

"I don't object to your being friendly with Claire, not in the least. She is a very nice girl indeed."

"Homer says she is more beautiful than a flower," Eric said, impulsively.

"Does Homer say that?" Hardman asked, with a wintry smile.

"He does; but then any one that ain't blind can see that."

"I don't want to damp your pleasure, boy," Hardman said, seriously, after a long pause. "But it is not wise to set your heart too much on anything. In this idiotic world everything goes wrong. And if ever you crave after a thing, you are certain not to get it. My wish has been to see you grow up untrammelled and unfettered. I want you still to get all the pleasure you can out of life. It is precious little you will get at best. Nothing ever happens as you would like it to happen. I would like you to lay that to heart now. Don't expect anything but trouble, and then you will not be disappointed. Brace yourself to meet darkness and anguish without whimpering, for they are the lot of all men. Life is a fraud, and death is the one supreme good."

Eric listened, as he had listened to previous outbursts, patiently and without replying, and, as soon as possible, stole out into the sunshine, and hurried off down to the river side, where Claire had promised to meet him.

One glance of her eyes, and the ghosts his uncle had conjured up all vanished. Who could be a pessimist in presence of such a fairy, and with the summer sunshine flooding hill and valley, and the summer wind making dreamy music in the trees?

So the days passed all too quickly, and grew into weeks, and the weeks into months; and the days shortened, and the trees shook off their leaves and stood bare in the blast, and the birds hushed their songs, and the flowers drooped and died, and the frost locked up the streams, and the snow wrapped the earth in a mantle of white, and

Christmas came and went, and the new year was ushered in once more to the music of Lindon bells.

Eric lay awake and listened. But somehow to-night there was no mirth in the music of the bells. The new year had dawned, but it only meant to him that Claire was going away, and life could never be the same at Priory Mere again. He would have shut out the wild revel of the bells if he could, for their brazen tongues kept repeating words that seemed a mockery to him now :—

“ Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go.
Ring out the false, ring in the true.”

He did not want the old to depart, or the new to come. He would have liked time just to stand still. He dreaded the coming days and weeks and months.

“ Ring, happy bells, across the snow.”

No; they were not happy bells at all. He would have seized and silenced their wretched lying tongues if he had the power.

He fell asleep at length, and dreamed that it was summer time, and that he and Claire were sitting on the rock above the weir, and watching the river dart past swift as an arrow, when suddenly she slipped from her position, and fell with a splash into the rushing torrent. For a moment he saw her white face rise to the surface of the water, saw her white hands stretched out appealingly, heard one agonising cry for help, and then she passed over the weir. He tried to move, tried to lift his hand, but he had no power left—not even to cry. A moment ago she was sitting by his side, radiant with beauty, glad in the joy of perfect life; now she was gone from him for ever.

With a despairing effort he started up at length and woke. The bells were silent now. The night was still, save when now and then a low moan stole down from the plantation. But the influence of the dream stuck to him like a burr, and would not be shaken off.

A fortnight later he stood, one bright frosty morning, on the platform of Lindon Road railway-station, and saw

Claire and the Major enter a first-class carriage, while a porter quickly slammed the door behind them.

He was just in time to get one squeeze of her hand, which she reached to him through the window. "Good-bye, Claire."

"Good-bye, Eric."

And then the train glided swiftly out of the station, and she was gone.

It was his dream over again, or, rather, his dream come true.

He wasn't clear in his geography as to the locality of Bonn. He knew it was somewhere in Germany; but that seemed at the moment the very uttermost part of the earth. He felt angry with the Major for not sending her to a school in England. Then he might see her every few months; now the chances were that nearly a year would elapse before she returned to Lindon.

Ah, poor lad, he little dreamed that so many years would pass ere they met again

CHAPTER XV.

A SURPRISE

.. To have met but once, but once,
And swept for ever apart
On the world's dark tide, that rushes on
And sunders many a heart !
To have looked on eyes like yours,
To have touched such a rose-leaf hand,
And never, never again to meet,
But in memory's dreamy land !”

FALCONER.

Of the next four years of Eric's life very little need be said. He worked at his lessons with steady persistency, until he knew all his uncle could teach him, and, indeed, a good deal more. In body he had grown perhaps more rapidly than in mind, and at eighteen was as tall as he ever would be. Had he gone into society he would have been an attractive figure and an eagerly-sought companion. But at Priory Mere he grew up unnoticed and unknown. Philip Hardman was as much a recluse as ever. With the exception of an occasional drive to Ribblesford or Yarncaster, he went nowhere. And so Eric had perforce to stay within the domain of Priory Mere, and find what pleasure he could in his books or in rambles round the country side.

Homer often declared to Sarah, “that it was a great shame Master Eric should be cooped up like a dog in a kennel,” with which Sarah most cordially agreed.

“I tell you what, Sarah,” Homer said one day, “the young master has parts; he ain't none o' your commonplace prigs.”

“Aye, he's 'mazin' handsome,” Sarah said, a proud smile lighting up her homely face.

"Handsome?" Homer answered, looking as serious as though he was in the thick of a theological argument with his master. "Handsome, Sarah, ain't in it. Why, he's the head of an Apolyon."

"Git away, 'Omer, do," said Sarah, with a laugh; "you don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Don't I, though?" said Homer, looking defiant.

"Of course you don't. Why, Apolyon is 'im as Bunyan talks about."

"What, the d——"

"Aye," said Sarah.

Homer burst into a loud laugh, in which his spouse most heartily joined.

"Well, well," said Homer, after a pause, "I didn't mean his Majesty, of course, but that young man they fixes on pedestals, as was so remarkable for his good looks."

"Oh, yes, I know who you mean," said Sarah, "but I can't think of his name."

"Well, it don't matter," Homer replied, rubbing his chin complacently; "but I consider Master Eric is a credit to us; he's not only handsome in looks, but he's as clever as he's handsome."

"That he is," said Sarah.

"Why, it was only this mornin' I heerd 'im giving the master sich a putting-up as I reckon he never had before," Homer went on. "Why, he fairly floored the governor."

"You don't say so."

"Aye, an' on religion, too. Oh! bless you, though we've had to keep our mouths shut, he's kept his eyes an' ears open."

"But 'ow did he floor the master?"

"Well, the argument was beyond me rather," Homer answered, with a look of perplexity in his eyes. "But he had 'im on different sorts of religion. 'Uncle,' says he, 'a tree is known by its fruit, and the fruits of what you call Christism are very different and very much superior to the fruits of Buddhism, or Brahmanism, or Islamism.'"

"The fruits of all are pernicious, Eric," the master said, quite snappishly.

"No, I don't see that quite," Master Eric replied,

‘but, of course, I have not yet had much opportunity of judging.’”

“‘Of course you haven’t,’ said the master, quite short like. ‘Wait till you’re ten years older, and then you’ll know something.’”

Sarah laughed. “I reckon he knows a’most as much as the master now,” she said.

“An’ a fine sight more,” Homer asserted. “Why, bless you, Sarah, he ain’t a been readin’, an’ studyin’, an’ thinkin’ all these years for nothin’. Not a bit on it. He may not talk very much, but he’s like Jim Brewer’s parrot.”

“What about the parrot?” said Sarah.

“Why, Jim said his parrot weren’t much at talkin’, but he was a beggar to think.”

Sarah curled her lips slightly, but did not reply, and after a few moments Homer went on again, “I keep a wonderin’ sometimes if he ain’t a pinin’ a little bit after Miss Claire.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, I see ‘im ramblin’ about the plantation an’ down by the river, an’ I hear of him loiterin’ in the churchyard among the graves, or sitting all alone on Routor Height, an’ you know, Sarah, them’s the places he used to be so much with Miss Claire.”

“He used to be in them places afore he ever know’d her.”

“That’s true, but after he did know her he were at them places a great deal more. An’ I can’t help thinkin’ as he misses her, an’ is a bit pinin’ for her to come home again.”

“Oh, nonsense, Homer; they’re neither on ‘em but childer yet, an’ what does he care for Miss Claire, or all the other girls in the parish?”

“For the other girls in the parish he don’t care nothin’, but Miss Claire he took to; bless her, she were as purty as a flower, an’ for that matter I’d like to see her again myself.”

“Well, she’s comin’ home for Christmas, they’re sayin’.”

“So they’ve said for the last three years,” grunted Homer, “but she ain’t turned up.”

“But that’s accounted for,” said Sarah. “You know

that for two years the Major an' his wife wintered abroad, an' Miss Claire joined 'em somewhere in the south, and the other year she were ill and couldn't get here."

"Likely as not the Major'll winter in the south again," Homer said.

"It's more likely our master will," Sarah asserted.

Homer laughed.

"When he goes I shall believe as he is agoi'," he said. "He's been talkin' about it for the last twenty years, but when it comes to the pinch he always backs out."

"But his neuralgia gets worse every year," said Sarah.

"An' his temper too," grunted Homer.

"And no wonder," said Sarah. "It's worse nor sleeping on a bag o' nails they say. I'm sure I pity him from my heart."

"So do I," said Homer; "but if he goes away just when Miss Claire is coming home it'll be a great disappointment to Master Eric."

"Not a bit of it," said Sarah; "he's nearly forgotten her by this time. Why, it's four years come January since she went away."

"Don't care if it's forty," persisted Homer, "I believe he's fair pinin' for a sight of her bonny face," and he got up hurriedly from his seat and left the room.

Meanwhile, if Eric was not actually pining for a sight of Claire's face, he was very eagerly anticipating her homecoming. No one knew how much he missed her when she went away, nor how changed the world seemed to him in her absence. In his boyish enthusiasm for his first and only real companion, he had invested her with a halo of romance and beauty that almost glorified her in his eyes.

Of love, as that word is generally understood, he did not dream. Claire was his friend and companion. He could talk to her as he could talk to no one else, and in their rambles together she had entered into his feelings, and plans, and ambitions, as no one had ever done before.

The first year of her absence had seemed the longest year of his life, and no one knew how keen and bitter was his disappointment when Christmas-time came and Claire had not returned. Since then two other Christmastides had come and gone, and now the year was on the wane again.

Homer had come nearest in guessing his feelings. But Homer did not know all. How could he know? Eric never wore his heart upon his sleeve, and rarely spoke to any one of the matters that lay nearest and deepest.

When the days began to shorten his spirits began to rise. "With the first week in December Claire will be home again," was the burden of his thoughts. Into the browning woods and by the deep river he rambled again, with a careless swing and an easy grace, that clearly betokened the thought that was in him. Books once more became dry and tedious, and lessons a bore.

"Didn't I tell you so," said Homer, one day to Sarah, as he saw the lad flinging his cap into the air and catching it on the toe of his boot. "Didn't I tell you so. The lad's fair glad to the tips of his fingers, and no wonder; she's purtier than any flower, and she's the only companion he ever had."

Homer was not far wrong in his surmise that Eric was glad to his finger tips. Nothing in his life before had he anticipated with such eagerness as this home-coming of Claire's.

"I wonder if she's altered," he said to himself one dreamy afternoon in early October, as he looked at his own reflection in a clear pool of water. "I wonder if she's at all grown up. I hope she has not curled up her hair and tied it in a knot; oh, I hope not," and he seized a stone and flung it into the middle of the pool, and stood watching the circling rings spreading ever outward until the last tiny wavelet sobbed gently on the sedgy strand.

"I daresay she's altered," he went on; "four years make lots of difference, especially in girls. Sarah says I'm altered ever so, but I don't think I am," and he went to the edge of the pool and looked at himself in the water that had grown still again.

"I don't know," he mused, "perhaps Sarah's right, after all. I know I'm quite a head taller; and, of course, I've learned a good deal. But I feel just the same that I ever did."

Then he pulled off his cap and ran his fingers through his hair, while a look of perplexity settled on his handsome face.

"No," he said, after a long pause, "I don't think I feel

quite the same either. I think about a lot of things I never used to think about, and I don't take everything for granted as I used to do. Sarah says she's losing her boy, and that I am fast growing into a man. I wonder now——"

And he replaced his cap and walked away down to the river side.

"This was Claire's favourite walk," he mused. "She liked the still deep water, and the wagtails skimming up and down after the flies, and the reflection of the bank and trees, so clear and distinct, and the low splash of the water coming down from the weir. I wonder if she'll care for the walk any more. The Rhine is so much grander than this, with the hills all around crowned with ruined castles. Oh, I should like to see the Rhine."

It was too damp to sit on the grass, so he loitered slowly along the bank, and shied a stone at a wagtail now and then.

"I don't think she's the sort to change very much," he continued to himself. "I've changed in many things, but I haven't changed towards her. She'll always be Claire, the best comrade that ever was. And if she's altered and forgotten me then I shall think of her as she used to be, with laughing blue eyes and sunny hair, and a voice that always sounded like music."

He halted after awhile, then turned round and began to retrace his steps.

"Anyhow, in two months she'll be here," he said. "And I'm going to the Hall to meet her. The Major says I'm to be among the first to give her welcome home. I do like the Major; he's always doing kind things, not only to me, but to everybody. I wonder why he always looks so careworn and sad. But Claire will brighten him up when she comes home. And the parish of Lindon will seem like a different place."

So Eric mused as the days went by, and another month told its tale of days and hours, and then came a surprise.

Hardman had been restless and fidgety for several weeks, and more uncommunicative than usual. When he did talk it was to complain of the cold and damp and fog, which he said made his neuralgia unendurable.

One evening, however, he returned from Ribblesford with

a number of trunks and portmanteaus, which Homer rolled into the house with an alarming amount of noise and commotion. Eric, coming downstairs at the time, stared in astonishment, scarcely able to credit his own senses.

"What's the meaning of this, Homer?" he asked, as soon as he had recovered from his astonishment.

"I don't know nothin', Master Eric; you must ask the governor," said Homer.

"It's very strange," he muttered. And he marched away to the library. Philip Hardman was pacing up and down the room with long and rapid strides; but he paused instantly when Eric entered, and clasped his hands behind him.

"Are those your boxes, uncle?" Eric asked, without waiting for him to speak.

"Yes; why?"

"Oh, I don't know; only I was not aware you wanted so many."

"Some of them are for you."

"For me?"

"Yes; we are going to travel."

"To travel, uncle?"

"Yes; won't you like it?"

"Oh, yes, very much; I've often longed to get away for a change."

"Well, then, you'll get away now."

"Oh, that will be nice. When do we start?"

"Next week."

Instantly Eric's countenance fell, and a look almost of alarm came into his eyes.

"Are you compelled to go so soon?" he asked, after a pause.

"Yes; I'd have gone before if I had known these beastly fogs had been here so soon."

"But would another month make very much difference, uncle?"

For a moment Hardman stared at him almost savagely. "You said a minute ago that you were longing to get away," he said, impatiently.

"I am very anxious to travel, uncle. But since we have waited so long, I should like to wait another month at least."

"And for why, pray?"

"Well, you know, uncle, Claire is coming home the first week in December, and I have not seen her for nearly four years."

"And what has that to do with the matter, pray? If you care more for Claire than you do for me you can stay here altogether, and I will go alone."

"Oh, no, uncle, I do not mean that at all," he replied, a pained look coming into his eyes.

"I have cared for you, fed you, educated you all these years," Hardman went on, "and this is the return I get."

"Oh, no! no!" Eric pleaded. "You do me an injustice. I do care for you very much, and I want to go with you. I only thought, if it would be all the same to you, I would like to see Claire again before we started."

"If you knew what I suffered," Hardman whined, "you would not ask me to stay an hour longer than is necessary in this beastly climate."

"I will not mention the matter again, uncle," Eric said, his face drawn with a nameless pain. "As soon as ever you are ready I am ready also."

"That is sensible," Hardman remarked, with a frown. "Now to business."

"Yes, uncle."

"We start on Monday morning for Algiers."

"For Algiers?"

"Yes. I have been making inquiries wherever possible, and on all hands it is recommended as a delightful winter resort, particularly for neuralgic subjects. It has the advantage also of being out of the way of the twopenny tourist. Moreover, I have considered your interests in the matter, as well as my own. I have been anxious that your education should be without prejudice and without bias. Most people grow up crammed full of superstition from their very birth, and so in after years have to unlearn a thousand foolish and hurtful things. This has not been so in your case. You are nearly a man now. The time is drawing near when in relation to many matters of opinion, of philosophy, of religion, perhaps, you will have to choose for yourself. As you get more into contact with the world of men you will not be able to avoid these things. Hence, as far as possible, you should look at all sides of questions

you are called upon to decide. Algiers will open up to you a new world of thought and speculation. It is anti-European in every sense of the word. The religion of the people is not the religion in vogue in England. You will be able to study Islamism side by side with Judaism and Christism. For myself, I have settled these matters long since. You will have to settle them also. But you will have this advantage, that you can approach these questions with an open mind. I hope you understand me. Remember it is for your good we travel, as well as my own. You are surprised, doubtless, that I have not mentioned the matter before. I have had my reasons. I have talked about going abroad many times in the past, but when it came to the point of leaving home, my courage has failed me. This is a confession of weakness, I know. So be it. I do not profess to be perfect. I shall not draw back now. I have purchased our tickets for the journey, and secured rooms at the Hotel d'Orient. Like Cæsar, I have crossed the Rubicon and burnt the bridge. We start on Monday. Now, good night, I wish to be alone the rest of the evening."

And with a stately bow he opened the door, and, without a word, Eric passed out.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE WING.

"I am not young—my life has passed its prime—
Perhaps I ne'er again shall tread this shore.
Life is a billow on the sea of Time,
That, once burst, rises never more.
Perchance mine soon may melt amid the roar
Of tempest, rising on that boundless sea.
Then will my grief and sorrow all give o'er,
Then shall life's joy or misery cease to be,
And I shall be resolved in vast eternity."

BROWNE.

For many months Claire's name never passed Eric's lips : but from his thoughts she was rarely absent. The very perversity of fate in forbidding their meeting kept her image constantly before him ; besides which, a very natural curiosity made him eager to look upon her face again, so that he might note the changes time had wrought, and ascertain, if possible, if her heart was still the same. There was no one, however, in whom he cared to confide. His whole life had been self-centred. He had grown up from childhood in the belief—a belief that had strengthened as the years had passed away—that in every real crisis and emergency he would have to depend upon himself. So he managed easily to keep his feelings under control, and no one guessed the thoughts that were constantly passing through his mind. If he had any disposition to mope, circumstances allowed no time for any such luxury. Every hour was crowded to the full in making the preparations necessary for so long a journey, and on the whole he enjoyed the bustle and excitement.

After the first shock of disappointment and pain had passed away, he quickly recovered his cheerfulness. What he had longed for for years had come at last. He was to

know the bliss of foreign travel, to see with his own eyes what he had often read about, to tread the streets of historic cities, to revel in the warmth and beauty of tropic climes. But for that one small fly in the ointment, his bliss would be perfect. But then, who ever had perfect happiness in this world? Certainly, if his uncle's philosophy was to be accepted as truth, perfect misery was much nearer the normal condition of average humanity. And so, on the whole, he concluded he had very little to complain of, but very much to be thankful for.

As the week hastened to its close, Hardman got into a state of nervous excitement that was truly pitiful. He did wish that the weather would clear, so many railway accidents occurred in foggy weather. The man who travelled in November, he declared, carried his life in his hand. He would be very thankful—but to what or to whom he did not say—when he had left England's beastly climate behind him. He hoped the present calm would not end in a gale, though he quite expected it would. Everything in this idiotic world went by the rule of contrary. Fog on land he expected, and a gale at sea.

Hardman had often declared, with a haughty wave of the hand, that "Death was the Supreme Good." But, somehow, when there seemed but the remotest chance of the "supreme good" coming his way, he was always very anxious to avoid it. Indeed, so much terror did the "supreme good" inspire in him, that but for the fear of making a laughing-stock of himself, he would have abandoned the journey at the last minute. It was his vanity and pride that kept him to what Homer called "the sticking-point." For a philosopher to display nervousness, for a stoic to show himself overcome with fear, would be fatal to the reputation he had been so many years in building up. He had gone too far now to be able to recede, without loss of dignity and prestige. If he was to perish in a railway accident, or be drowned in a gale, why, the world must never know that he met his fate with the heart of a chicken. No, no! let the world think he died game, and met the "supreme good" with a smile.

So he puckered his face into what he flattered himself was an expression of defiance, and gave his orders with more than his usual pomposity

Homer almost lost his temper over what he conceived to be an absurd waste of time and labour and money.

"Here I haven't finished my plantin' yet," he said to Sarah, "an' I must be kept on the trot over nonsense of this kind."

"But he means to go this time," said Sarah.

"Does he?" grunted Homer, with a shrug of his shoulders; "he's meant to go scores of times, but when it comes to the stickin' point, he always drops off like a sick leech. Don't you be alarmed, Sarah, he'll no more go than I shall."

"Don't be too sure, Homer," was Sarah's rejoinder, "he can stick sometimes."

"Yes, he can, when he thinks his neck isn't in no danger."

Homer had to confess, however, when Monday morning came, that for once his master meant it. Philip Hardman walked about with a white, grave face, and gave his last orders with all the seriousness of a general on the eve of a great battle. Here and there he lingered for a moment or two, and put a book or fossil in its place.

He felt all the solemnity of the occasion. He might never return again. He was taking a long journey—at least to him, who had never been out of England, it seemed a very long journey indeed.

He shook hands with Sarah and Peggy at the door—a mark of great condescension on his part—and expressed the hope that they would look well after the place in his absence.

Eric had parted with them previously, and was now quietly sitting in the carriage waiting his uncle's pleasure. He was not unmoved now that the time had actually come for him to go away, while the grief of Sarah and Peggy had touched him to the quick.

He was very thankful when, at length, his uncle entered the carriage and closed the door, and Homer gathered up the reins and drove away. But it was not until the train began to glide out of the station and he saw Homer on the platform frantically waving a red pocket-handkerchief that he felt that he had really started on the journey.

In London, a glimpse of the great dome of St. Pauls touched many old memories into life again. But they did not go anywhere near the scenes of his early childhood.

Next morning they were on the move once more, and very soon after leaving Charing-cross Eric was highly entertained by a wordy warfare between a stout old lady and several of the passengers, particularly a tall American who had crossed the Atlantic for the purpose of "doing" Europe, and any other continent that might happen to be in his way.

The carriage they were in was an ordinary first-class saloon, and the stout old lady in question had seated herself with her maid at the end nearest the engine. Previous to this, however, she had piled about a dozen bags and bundles on the floor, much to the inconvenience of the other travellers. Each separate article of this miscellaneous assortment of luggage was conspicuously labelled "The Hon. Mrs. Bump." The morning was cold and raw in the extreme, with a damp fog enveloping everything in its clammy folds. Notwithstanding this, however, the Hon. Mrs. Bump insisted on having the window nearest her wide open.

Hardman was the first to protest against this. He happened to be sitting just where the draught caught the side of his face, and being a martyr to neuralgia he naturally was very anxious for the window to be closed, and so got up from his seat and walked toward the window with the intention of closing it.

"You are not to close that window," said Mrs. Bump, reaching out her hand as though to check his advance.

"I'm not to close it?" said Hardman, mildly, but with a look of astonishment in his eyes.

"Most certainly not!"

"And why not, pray?"

"Because I object to having it closed. Is not that sufficient reason?"

"Well, scarcely," said Hardman, quailing before her steady gaze. "I suffer greatly from neuralgia, and this draught to me is simply intolerable."

"Then you should have stayed at home," was the reply.

Hardman stood stock-still, as though thunderstruck. The next moment the American came to his rescue.

"If you are afraid to close that window, stranger, I'll do it for you," and the tall form of the American marched across the floor of the carriage.

"You do it?" said the Hon. Mrs. Bump, with flaming eyes.

"Yaas, I guess I will," was the quiet reply.

"Why, the atmosphere of this carriage is like a tap-room already," she said, panting with rage and excitement.

"I am not used to tap-rooms myself," said the American, with a smile, "doubtless, you are an authority on the matter, But I know this car is cold as Canada in a blizzard, so here goes the window," and suiting the action to the word he pulled it up with a click.

Instantly Mrs. Bump was on her feet, and almost before the American knew her intention, the window went down again with a thud.

"Look here, marm," he said turning round, "you are just a little bit impertinent."

"Impertinent? How dare you? Do you know who I am?"

"I do not, and I cannot say I am particularly anxious for the honour of your acquaintance."

"Rude man," she exclaimed. "I wish you to know I'm the Hon Mrs. Bump."

"I'm sorry for the honourable," he said, with a drawl, "for it is evident you are a woman of no breeding to speak of," and he closed the window a second time.

Mrs. Bump grew livid, and stamped with rage. "Am I in England?" she exclaimed, glancing swiftly round the carriage. "Is it possible that a number of English gentlemen will allow a lady to be insulted by this vulgar American?"

"I think it is the general wish, madam, that the window should be closed," said Philip Hardman, with great dignity.

"Oh dear, I shall suffocate," Mrs. Bump exclaimed, fanning herself with a lace handkerchief, "and all through this low-bred Yankee."

"You should ride on the buffer, marm," said the American coolly, "or hire a train for yourself."

Mrs. Bump shut her eyes, while all the others ~~chattered~~ ^{sifted}.

The American remained standing near the door, calmly awaiting any fresh development of the Hon. Mrs. Bump's temper. But seeing she made no further move, or even opened her eyes, he turned and addressed the company.

"I'm sorry," he said, "if I have done or said anything

that may be considered rude. 'The greatest good of the greatest number,' is our motto on the other side. Still, I closed this window mainly in the interests of the neuralgic gentleman, who seemed overawed by this female. Now, suppose we take the vote. Those in favour of having this window closed hold up the right hand."

Instantly every hand went up with the exception of those of Mrs. Bump and her maid.

"Wall, I guess that is purty decisive," said the American. And he came back and took his seat by the side of Eric.

"I'm much obliged to you," said Philip Hardman, leaning across and speaking in a whisper, "very much obliged indeed."

"You're welcome, stranger," said the American, pulling out his card case, and handing his card to Hardman. "Thar is my name, Ezra Short, of Toledo. Everybody in our city knows me."

"Many thanks," said Hardman, returning the civility, and then silence fell between them.

A few minutes later, however, Eric and Mr. Short were carrying on a very animated conversation. Eric quite took to the American. There was something so deliciously quaint and original in his whole style and manner. Such a merry twinkle in his small, grey eyes, such a captivating drawl in his speech, such an absence of the stiffness characteristic of English travellers, that he was quite anxious to know more of this transatlantic voyager.

In this matter Mr. Short put no obstacle in his way. On the contrary, he was as eager for a chat as Eric was. And so commenced a friendship that was not without its influence on Eric's after life.

The Hon. Mrs. Bump gave no further trouble, and after leaving the train at Folkestone, they did not see her again. As soon as they boarded the steamer, Hardman went below. But Short and Eric preferred, notwithstanding the cold, to remain on deck.

"And so you and your uncle are gwine to winter in Algiers, eh?" the American said, reflectively.

"That is uncle's intention at present," Eric replied.

"It's a place that my geography appears to be shaky about," said Short, diving his hands into his coat pockets.

"It seems to me to 'nave a kind of furren sound, like Jerusalem and Damascus and such places."

"Well, it is an Arab city, you know," said Eric laughing.

"But I'm unable to locate the place," said Short, looking puzzled. "Ain't it in Africa somewhere?"

"Yes, on the Mediterranean seaboard."

"Ah, then, now I've got it. When we get down to Marseilles it'll be over against us like?"

"Just so, only there will be five hundred miles of water between."

"Exactly. And it's a nice place you say?"

Eric laughed. "I know nothing about it except what I have heard and read," he answered.

"And what might that be?"

"That it is a beautiful place, with a lovely climate. That the city is encircled with green and wooded hills, and faces a bay that has been called the 'pearl of the Mediterranean.' That there are plenty of drives about, that the country is very fertile, and that the Arab portion of the city possesses a never-ending charm for Europeans."

"Why, stranger, you make my mouth water," said Short.

"Then you had better go across and see for yourself," said Eric.

"I don't know," said Short. "I came across to do Europe, and I intend to do it too. But Africa—well, 'no. I hardly calculated on seeing Africa."

"But if you did, you would have all the more to talk about when you got back," Eric said.

"That is true," said Short with a drawl, "that's a strong point, and I guess I'll have to consider the matter," and then the conversation drifted to other subjects.

On reaching Paris, Eric said good-bye to the friendly American, scarcely expecting they would ever meet again. He was rather disappointed that they were not spending a few days in the gay capital. But his uncle was determined to push on as rapidly as possible. So he saw nothing of Paris in the jostling ride across the city in a wheezy and broken-down cab. They had just time to get a hot lunch at the railway buffet before the train started, and then they sped away southward through the night.

Eric was tired and sleepy, so he soon fell into a heavy and dreamless slumber, and when he woke next morning the sun was shining brightly, and the beautiful waters of the Mediterranean were just coming into sight.

"Oh, this is lovely," he said. "What a change from the cold and murky scenes we have left behind us."

But his uncle was too cross to reply, he had not slept a wink all the night, and the journey had seemed fearfully long and tedious. As a consequence, he was what he termed head-achish and miserable.

He recovered himself, however, on his arrival at Marseilles. And as he managed to get a nap in the smoke-room of the hotel to which they had repaired for lunch, he felt quite himself again when the time came for him to board the steamer, and walked up the gangway with a jaunty air and a set of his lips that meant defiance and unconcern.

Five hours later all his courage and philosophy had failed him. Limp, haggard, and wretched, he crept to the captain's room and begged an interview.

"Captain," he pleaded, "can't you put back, or run for some near point of land?"

"Put back," he exclaimed, "vat for me put back?" and his blue eyes twinkled with merriment.

"The gale," gasped Hardman, "we can never live through a gale like this."

"You tink so? Ah, den ve shall go to vat you Anglaise call Dafy Jones' locker," and he opened his eyes and spread his hands in well-feigned alarm.

"Oh, but this is awful," said Hardman; "can nothing be done?" and he clung to the sofa end to keep himself from rolling on the floor.

"*Mon Dieu*," said the Captain with mock gravity, "you had better go to your berth and die—ah—t

'Die?' gasped Hardman, "surely not."

"Ah, *mon ami*, I vill escort you," said the Captain, and he led the unresisting figure below, and called a steward and gave him instructions to help Hardman to bed.

For the rest of the night Hardman lay with closed eyes, expecting every moment to be his last. He was too ill to move, too frightened to open his eyes. He could

only lie still and moan as the good ship, with steady roll and an occasional lurch, pushed her way through the phosphorescent waves. How in those long hours he wished he had never left his safe nest at Priory Mere, and vowed if he ever set foot on land again nothing should induce him to leave it, may all be easily imagined. The details of that weary night shall be left untold.

CHAPTER XVII.

NEWS FROM HOME.

"Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit, nor stand, but go !
Be our joys three parts pain !
Strive, and hold cheap the strain ;
Learn, nor account the pang ; dare, never grudge the throe !"

BROWNING.

It was night when the *Ville d'Oran* entered the Bay of Algiers. The sea was much too rough to bring the vessel up to the wooden jetty or gangway that does duty for a pier ; and so the usual method—common to nearly all Mediterranean ports—of landing in open boats had to be resorted to. This, in the day-time in a calm sea, is trying enough, but in the night-time, with the wind blowing half a gale, is, to put it mildly, decidedly unpleasant.

Hardman had hailed the lights of the city gleaming over the dark waters with feelings akin to rapture, but when he looked over the bulwarks after the vessel had come to anchor, his heart almost sank within him. What was the meaning of this yelling, jabbering, gesticulating, bare-headed, bare-footed, half-naked crowd of savages that surrounded them ? The sea seemed fairly alive with the frenzied horde, tossing recklessly in their shallow boats, their swarthy faces looking positively hideous in the light of the flaring naphtha lamps ; each man struggling to get his shallop nearest the vessel, each man striving to push the others away, while ever the big waves rose and fell, tossing them in all directions.

"Are we to land in those boats ?" Hardman asked of a steward who was passing near him.

"*Oui, Monsieur*," was the quick reply, and the steward vanished into the darkness.

Hardman fairly groaned.

Eric, however, regarded the affair as great fun. The whole situation was so new and so novel that he had no eyes for the disagreeable side. It would be something to be remembered, and talked about, and laughed over in the years to come. Ah! if he ever saw Claire again he would have some novel experiences to relate.

"Don't you wonder those fellows don't get drowned, uncle?" he said, coming close to Hardman's elbow.

"I wish they would drown, every imp of them," Hardman snarled.

"Oh, I don't," said Eric. "I think they look wonderfully picturesque."

"Picturesque?" snarled Hardman. "I've come nearer believing in hell and the devil to-night than ever I did before in my life."

Meanwhile, the passengers were dropping their baggage and themselves into the open boats, with sundry objurgations which were more expressive than polite.

"I'll never land in that way," groaned Hardman; "I'll stay here all night first."

"I fancy we shall not be allowed to do that," Eric said.

"Allowed? Who's to hinder I wonder?"

But at that moment the portier from the hotel came on board, and instantly took charge of Philip Hardman and his belongings, to that gentleman's inexpressible relief.

Half an hour later they had got safely past the customs officials, and were driving rapidly away in the direction of the hotel that was to be their home for the next few months.

Early next morning Hardman awoke with a sense of freedom and buoyancy that were most unusual with him. For the time being his neuralgia had left him, and he could lie still and think in peace. The long journey was ended, the dangers of the deep were passed, and he was safely housed, comfortable and warm. He felt a little weary, it is true, but that only added to the pleasure of lying in bed, and then, how fragrant and warm was the atmosphere that

filled the room, how strange and dreamy the few sounds that fell upon his ears. He got up at length, and walking to the window, pulled open the shutters and looked out. "Gad!" he exclaimed, "this is lovely!"

The wind of the previous day and night had died away into absolute stillness, and the glorious bay stretched before him still as a meadow pool. To the left a portion of the city could be seen, rising steeply up from the water and facing the east, after the fashion of Arab cities. All around him were gardens and plantations, with white residences peeping out from amidst their wealth of sombre green. Far away to the right just a glimpse of the Atlas mountains could be seen, above which the sun was slowly rising, and flooding their snowy peaks with light; while in the garden below him the oranges were ripening on the trees, the geraniums were flaming red on all the banks, the roses were still exhaling their delicious fragrance, and festoons of lovely trailing flowers swung in all directions.

"Better than I expected," he muttered, a feeble smile overspreading his face. "I think I can do here for a month or two."

But he little dreamed, even then, how greatly he would get interested in the place, and how that interest would grow from week to week. Having certain antiquarian tastes, he found the old city a perfect mine of wealth and interest. To Eric, who affected no taste in that direction, two or three excursions into the network of narrow and dirty courts were quite sufficient. But Hardman, in spite of foul smells and other disagreeables, plunged into the labyrinth nearly every other day, and generally came out smiling. This old-world life which he saw all around him was a perfect revelation, and sent him to read again some of the Old Testament stories which he had almost forgotten. Here, before his very eyes, these ancient scenes were enacted over again, and the book he had so long despised began to have for him a living interest.

Eric, however, spent most of his time in the country. On every hand the encircling hills were gashed with deep ravines, and threaded with narrow camel tracks, and he preferred the sweet air of the country to the stuffy atmo-

sphere of the city. Moreover, out there on the Mustapha Slope was quite a colony of English residents, to some of whom he got introductions, and who invited him to tennis parties and other social gatherings.

So the days slipped quickly and pleasantly away, until it wanted but a few days of Christmas. Each week Hardman received a brief note from Homer, informing him how matters were progressing at Priory Mere. But on the day before Christmas-eve Eric got a long letter from Homer all to himself. It was lying on his plate when he came down to breakfast, so he slipped it quickly into his pocket and said nothing.

Directly the meal was over he stole away to his bedroom and bolted the door. He felt certain Homer would have something to say about Claire, and he was tingling to the finger tips to know the news.

The first part of the letter he hurriedly scanned, until he came to the name that had sounded like music to him from the first.

"Miss Claire has been twice to Priory Mere since she came home," the letter said. "The first time she came by herself, the other time she comed with the new curate as has come to Lindon. Mr. Lane has been terrible ill with as'ma, and so he's got a curate fresh from college, a very good-looking young chap, who's goin' to turn the parish upside down and inside out. He's visitin' everybody—church folk an' chapel folk, rich folk an' poor folk; an' Miss Claire has been helpin' him. She's terrible good to the poor, so they do say in Lindon. She sits by the beds o' the old folk and sick people, an' reads to them by the hour, an' talks to 'em like an angel. She ain't a bit proud either. She comes to me an' says, 'Well, Homer, I'm glad to see you again, and how are you gettin' on, an' how's Sarah?' Bless you, I fairly blushes when she holds out her purty little hand to shake hands with me. An' then we goes into the house, and she *would* sit in the kitchen, and Sarah comes in all of a flutter, with her cap wrong way about. But, bless you, it didn't make no difference to Miss Claire, not a bit. She just goes up an' says, 'Excuse me, Sarah, but your cap is a bit awry,' an' she straightens it so purty like, and then smiles at Sarah, until the old

lass was fair ready to cry for very pleasure. And ain't she bonny, that's all? She were purtier than a flower when she was a gal. But, now she's grown up she's fair lovely—she is for sure. Four years have made a great difference in her. She's quite tall now, an' she don't let her hair fly about in the wind. She's got it done up in a great shinin' heap at the back o' her head. Oh! but she does look bonny. I think the curate is fair struck with her, an' no wonder. She said as how it was too bad for you an' the master to go away just when she was comin' home, and she wanted to know if you had altered, an' if you had grown much. 'Oh, bless you,' I said, 'Master Eric is quite grown up, you'd hardly know him.' And then she laughed, and said she'd know you anywhere, however much you had altered. She's goin' away again in Janiuary, and when she comes home again she comes for good. The Major seems very fond of her, but he's only poorly, she says. He's scarcely showed himself since you went away, and it does seem a terrible long time. Won't my old heart rejoice when I see you home once more. I hope those African savages won't kill you and eat you afore you come home. Sarah gets quite nervous when I reads your letters to her, and she wonders at the master takin' you to sich a heathen place. Though Miss Claire, who's been there, an' everywhere else nearly, says it's a very purty place. The curate didn't say much when he called. He seemed to like to hear Miss Claire talk, and he scarce took his eyes off her all the time, but then I don't wonder at that, she's like a picture. He's a very good-lookin' young man is the curate, and is making a very good name for himself in Lindon. The Miss Lanes, they say, are fair gone on him, but he ain't got no eyes for them when Miss Claire's about. Though Miss Lucy, the rector's youngest gal, is very nice-looking, an' wouldn't be a bad chance for the curate, that's what people is saying in Lindon. But you know how folks will talk, and sich talk often comes to nothing in the end. You'll excuse me writin' all this, but I thought you'd like to know all as is going on hereabouts. I wish you was a coming home for Christmas, it'll seem dreadful quiet. Not that we ever made anything of Christmas at Priory Mere. I wish we had. But the master would have his way. We are all keeping very well.

And with very great respects, and no more at present.—
From your obedient servant, HOMER BRENT."

Eric quietly folded the letter when he had finished it, and replaced it in the envelope, then, turning to the window, he sat for a long time quite motionless, looking out beyond the gardens and plantations to the great sea that stretched away into space.

He had been deeply interested in the letter, and yet it had awakened thoughts and feelings that had a suggestion of pain in them. The idea of a stranger filling his place was not altogether pleasant. He had been Claire's friend and companion—in some measure her confidante—and for another to take that position, however good or good-looking he might be, was just a little bit trying. He would have been much better pleased if there had been no allusion to any curate. Indeed, he could not see why a curate should come to Lindon at all. It is true, he knew little or nothing about the duties or uses of such individuals, but just then he felt a decided prejudice against the whole race of them.

He got up at length, and strolled out into the garden. The sun was shining brightly in a cloudless sky, but underneath the trees the air was still damp and chilly. A little way to the right was an open tennis lawn, towards which he bent his steps. Seated in one of the chairs, in the genial sunshine, was a man, his face half hidden by a wide-awake hat.

Eric paused for a moment. There was something in the man's figure that struck him as being familiar. The long legs, the high-heeled Wellington boots, the angular frame, the square shoulders, even the wide-awake hat, had a familiar look. That he was not some one staying at the hotel Eric knew very well, unless he had come late the previous night.

Then all at once the truth flashed across his mind. And walking up to the motionless figure, he said in his cheeriest tones, "Good morning, Mr. Short. Where in the world did you come from?"

"Stranger," exclaimed the genial American, springing at once to his feet and reaching out his long bony hand. "I'm delighted to see you, I am, indeed. And how is

your worthy uncle?" and he gave Eric's hand a grip, while he spoke, that made him wince.

"Oh, he is very much better, thank you," Eric said, withdrawing his hand from the friendly vice as quickly as possible. "And how are you, and when did you arrive? You see I'm almost as inquisitive as an American."

Mr. Short laughed. "Wall, I guess a genuine American is not going to remain in ignorance through fear of asking a question or two," he said. "But one question at a time, if you please."

"Well then, I'll begin with your health," laughed Eric. "I hope you are well?"

"Never better," was the reply. "These Southern locations suit me to a T. I like the sunshine. I revel in it, in fact. To me it is the symbol of universal blessing and infinite goodness."

Eric lifted his eyebrows in mild astonishment. The reply was rather more than he expected, and seemed to reveal the American in a new light.

"You've certainly come to the right place in coming to Algiers," Eric said, after a pause. "It has been bright nearly every day since we came."

"And you like it?"

"For some things, yes. The old city is very quaint, and at first it seemed very curious to see the Arab women going round with their veiled faces, and the Arab men stalking by in their flowing robes. But one soon gets used to it. I keep in the country mostly. There are some wonderful dells and ravines about the place."

"I'll join you in your rambles, if you'll let me," said Mr. Short. "To be out among the trees and flowers in God's beautiful sunshine is heaven to me."

Eric laughed.

"Ah! you are amused are you?" Short went on. "You thought I would care more for the market or the quay; that I was one of those Yankees that cared for nothing but the almighty dollar? There, stranger, you are mistaken. I say no word agin the dollar, mind you; it's a very purty coin, and amazingly useful. But a man can't feed his heart and mind and soul on dollars. Not a bit of it. He wants nature, the singing of the birds, and the whispering of the

winds, and the deep music of the sea, and he wants religion to interpret these things to him and make their meaning clear."

"Ah, now you are getting a little beyond me," Eric said, with a puzzled look in his eyes. "But I'm glad you're fond of the country, and if you don't mind a stiff walk in the sunshine I'll show you some lovely places."

"That's good," said Short. "But for a day or two I guess I will moon around here in these gardens, and try and get my bearings."

"Then you are staying at the d'Orient,"

"Staying at the Doryong? No! I'm staying at the hotel."

"Which hotel?"

"Why, this hotel."

"Just so; the Hotel d'Orient."

"Oh, that's the way you pronounce it, is it? Excuse me, stranger, but this foreign gibberish is the one drawback to these parts. But I'm getting into the hang of it bit by bit. I guess when I get back to Toledo I shall pretty well astonish some of our folks."

Eric thought he would, but did not say so.

"Do you return soon?" he asked, after a pause.

"Well, no, I guess not. It'll take me a few years to see all I want to see."

"A few years?" Eric exclaimed in astonishment.

"I guess it will," was the quiet answer. "You see, things must be looked at in detail, as well as bulk, if they are to be properly seen."

"But I hear of people doing Europe in a few days even," laughed Eric.

"That's one to us Americans, you bet," Short said, good-humouredly. "And folks who can do that are no doubt very smart people. I'm not so smart. I go at a slower pace. And since I've nobody to please but myself, I see no reason for hurrying. I came across to do Europe properly, and I'm goin' to do it, if the Almighty grants me life and health."

"And coming to 'do' Europe, you escape away as soon as possible to Africa," laughed Eric.

"That's true. Finding myself so near this coast, I couldn't resist the temptation."

"But you haven't told me yet when you arrived."

"I only got in about midnight last night, and to tell you the truth, I've had no breakfast yet."

"I beg your pardon for keeping you," Eric said, quickly.

"You needn't. I'm delighted to find you here. I'll go in now and have a cup of coffee; later on we'll meet again, and I'm calculating we will have some rare times together," and with a wave of his hand he marched away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ACCIDENT.

“Nature hath assigned”

Two sovereign remedies for human grief—
Religion, sweetest, firmest, first, and best,
Strength to the weak, and to the wounded balm;
And strenuous action next.”

SOUTHEY.

ERIC seated himself in the chair the American had just vacated, and gave himself up to reflection. Somehow, in spite of the beautiful sunshine and the lovely prospect and the pleasant conversation he had just held with Mr. Short, he felt restless and ill at ease. What was it he lacked? Not health, or wealth, or leisure. With respect to the first, like the American, he was never better in his life; with respect to the second, his uncle paid all the bills, and allowed him as much pocket money as he cared to spend; and as for leisure, if anything, he had too much of it. But with all these advantages, his heart was yet hungering for something he did not possess.

Then he thought of the American's words. “The heart and mind and soul can't feed on dollars.” Ah! could anything satisfy the heart's hunger? Was there any land of contentment on earth? Did any one ever find full satisfaction?

Mr. Short had talked about the voices of nature, and religion to interpret them. But then his uncle characterised all religion as superstition, and, on the whole, he was disposed to adopt his uncle's view. He had seen many types of religion since he came to Algiers. Every week three Sabbath days were observed. The Mohammedans observed Friday, the Jews Saturday, and the Christians Sunday. And then, even among these, there

were different sects and orders. Who, then, was right? Looking at the matter from the outside he did not see that there was very much to choose between them. His uncle said that all religions were equally true and equally false, and on the face of it that seemed the most sensible view to take.

What, then? Must he yield to the gloomy pessimism of his uncle? Must he believe nothing he could not see and prove? Was he merely a better sort of animal, to live his little life of struggle and disappointment, and then cease to be, as the animals ceased to be? That was his uncle's philosophy, but it had not very much in it to recommend it. It was a dull, dark, hopeless thing. Very likely the meanest Arab that baked daily in the sunshine would say his religion was a thousand times better than that.

He got up from his chair at length, and sauntered down through the garden and into the street, and hailing a passing omnibus, was soon landed in the heart of the busy city. For awhile he loitered hither and thither, then paused before the open door of a Mosque. From across the way, from up the street and down the street, from market and bazaar, from court and alley, came tall and swarthy men, some richly dressed, some covered with sack-ing, and leaving their slippers on the steps of the Mosque, they entered. From where he stood he could see into the building, a place devoid of beauty or ornament. The floor was covered with straw matting; similar material was wound round the pillars. He could see little else save the worshippers kneeling upon the floor; some with their faces to the ground; some with their heads thrown back and their eyes towards heaven.

Did they find satisfaction in this, he wondered? Were these ignorant Arabs possessed of a secret of peace he did not know? He turned away after a few minutes and struck up a steep street, and finally emerged from the city by a beautiful road, that wormed round the spurs and in and out among the ravines that cleft the hill-side. He had nearly got back to the hotel when he met the American slowly sauntering along, with his hands in his pockets and a big cigar in his mouth.

"Stranger," he said, getting the cigar between his

teeth, "this is simply fine. I never did feel so lazy since I was born, and I never enjoyed being lazy as I do now."

"I am glad to learn you are so well satisfied," Eric said, a little bit cynically.

"Satisfied? If I'm not I'm an ungrateful dog, and there ain't no two opinions on that score either. Why, bless you," and he took the cigar from his mouth, "how can one help being satisfied?"

"I don't know," Eric answered, gloomily. "It seems to me that most folks can't help the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"Being dissatisfied."

"Aye, there are some folks that'll be dissatisfied with Heaven itself—that is, supposing they ever get there. But such folks have a twist in their nature that wants straightening out."

"And how is that to be done?"

"Young man, nothing but God's grace can do it," he said seriously, and then he began to blow at his cigar again.

Eric curled his lip slightly, and remained silent.

"Well, well," said Short, after a pause, "this ain't the time, perhaps, to talk religion. And I ain't one of the sanctimonious sort, who thinks it his duty to preach a sermon at every favourable and unfavourable opportunity, so suppose we get down under the orange trees and talk general."

"I'm at your service," Eric answered, and the two walked away together.

* * * * *

Christmas came and passed away, and the New Year dawned and travelled through two of its months before anything of note transpired. There had been the usual weekly note from Homer, and towards the end of January Eric got a second letter all to himself. But it was not so interesting as the first. Claire had not been again to Priory Mere, but there had been a grand party of young people at the Hall, while the curate had paid a second visit to Priory Mere, this time accompanied by Miss Lucy Lane, and between them had nearly succeeded in making a proselyte of Peggy, representing to her that Dissent was

schism, and that schism was a deadly sin, and that unless she repented and went to church she was certain to lose her soul.

Peggy, according to Homer's account, was nearly frightened out of her wits by these terrible representations, and required a very strong dose of his logic repeated for several days in succession before she recovered her normal state.

All this, however, had little or no interest for Eric. He knew nothing of either Church or Dissent, and cared less, while all these squabbles over "views" and "dogmas" seemed but confirmations of his uncle's dictum, that all religions were alike—worthless.

During the month of January the weather was not nearly so favourable as it had been. But with the advent of February the skies cleared again, and the sun blazed forth from a cloudless sky. Eric and Mr. Short took long rambles in all directions. Sometimes they went alone, but more generally they kept each other company.

Hardman began to gather his things together, and even to pack some of his boxes, for he had determined with the beginning of March to turn his face towards home.

The last day of February was gloomy and somewhat depressing. Yet, notwithstanding the state of the atmosphere, Eric started directly after lunch for a long ramble. In a very few days now he would say good-bye to Algiers, perhaps for ever, and so he resolved to make the most of his time. He hoped to find Mr. Short somewhere about, but in this he was disappointed, and a very real disappointment it was. Though the American was double his own age, he had proved himself such a companionable fellow, so uniformly genial and good-tempered, so cheerful and juvenescent in his manner, that he never felt any disparity in the matter of age. They might be lads together, and they might have known each other all their lives.

If he felt any regret at all at leaving, the American lay at the bottom of it, they had become such fast friends that whenever the parting day came it would be a grief to both.

On the afternoon in question Eric loitered in the garden for fully half-an-hour, in the hope that Mr. Short would put in an appearance, but finding he was not likely to do

so, he started off at length alone. Leaving the level carriage way, he struck up a steep camel track, and was soon beyond any visible habitation. The atmospheric conditions were not favourable to rapid walking, so he loitered slowly on, mile after mile, busy with his own thoughts, and quite unmindful of the flight of time. The road he had taken described a large circle, and terminated at length in a steep and narrow path, down a deep ravine, almost within sight of the city. The ravine was overhung with tall Eucalyptus trees, and filled with brushwood. With cautious steps he descended the steep, zig-zag path, for it was rapidly getting dusk, particularly in the shadow of the trees.

At length he paused suddenly, and listened. But the silence of the ravine was almost oppressive; not a sound of any kind fell on his ears.

"Strange," he muttered. "I suppose I must have been mistaken; but, if so, I never knew my ears to deceive me so before."

"Oh, there it is again," he said, as a low, feeble moan fell upon his ears. "I wonder what it can mean," and he looked round him, with a startled, apprehensive expression.

The place was uncanny enough in the daytime, with a blaze of sunshine flooding it. But now, in the dusk and silence of evening, its aspect was absolutely forbidding, and he was half disposed to rush out of it as quickly as possible. But that low moan held him as though he had been transfixed.

Then he began to wonder if it might be some trick or ruse to waylay and murder him. Those silent Arabs, with their calm, immobile faces, might not be so friendly as they appeared. He had never cared to meet them in the dark alone since his first coming amongst them. Their very habit of starting up in places where they were least expected, and then as quickly and silently vanishing, made him suspicious. They might have nothing but good-will in their hearts, but their manner did not inspire confidence.

Another low moan—and this time clearly from the bottom of the ravine just below him—decided him. Going close to the edge, he looked over. Evidently a large piece of rock had been loosened, and had fallen away, the brush-



"No!" he exclaimed, "it's Mr. Snow."

wood below had been beaten down, but nothing else was visible.

To swing himself down the steep side was no easy matter, but he was young and agile, and at that moment quite fearless, and, in less time than it takes to pen the words, he was at the bottom. Pushing aside the tropical undergrowth, he came upon the figure of a man, with a large piece of rock lying across his body. Not an Arab either—the man was in European dress.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed, starting back, "it's Mr. Short! Is this an accident, I wonder, or has there been foul play?"

There was no time, however, to be wasted in fruitless speculation. Something would have to be done for his friend, and that quickly. To roll away the stone that lay across him was the first essential; that done, to ascertain, if possible, the nature and extent of his injuries.

To move the stone was no easy matter; but Eric felt, under the excitement of the moment, as though he possessed superhuman strength. How he moved the stone he never knew. He only knew he did it, and then he took the American in his arms and marched with him down the ravine. What a march that was, down through the tangled brake of undergrowth; down over sliding shale and loose boulders; down through stagnant pools and fretted water channels; and still down, never halting or pausing, or considering what was before him. Torn with thorns, pricked with cactus leaves, almost faint from his exertions, he still stumbled on. An occasional moan from the sufferer assured him that his friend was still alive, and, with that assurance, he was fain to be content. He knew, if his strength held out a little longer, he would reach the foot of the ravine where the carriage way crossed it; once there help could soon be got.

At length he laid down his burden with his head against a bank, and, kneeling beside him, he felt his pulse. It was still beating, but that was all.

It was dark now, and the road was silent and deserted. First in one direction he ran, then in another, but not a soul could be seen anywhere, not a footstep could be heard approaching.

Then, suddenly, two Arabs appeared upon the scene—where they sprang from he could not imagine. Silent as the dawn they cleft the darkness, and stood before him like two tall ghosts, wrapped in ample folds of white calico.

At any other time he would have felt nervous, but he did not think of himself now. All his concern was for his friend, who, even now, for all he knew, might be beyond the reach of human help or skill.

Approaching the nearest Arab, he touched him on the arm, and, pointing first to his friend and then in the direction of Mustapha, he said, "Hotel d'Orient."

In a moment they seemed to comprehend his meaning, and, turning to each other, they carried on a conversation for several seconds, not a word of which, however, could Eric understand.

Then one of them slipped off his outer mantle and spread it on the ground. It was the size of a large tablecloth when thus spread out. The second Arab followed suit, and laid his mantle on the top of the other. Then they raised Mr. Short, and laid him gently across it, and then tied each corner in a knot. That done, they grasped the corners firmly inside the knots, raised their burden slowly and gently from the ground, and marched away.

Eric walked behind, but he had great difficulty in keeping pace with them. With even, swinging pace, they stalked on, their burden gently swaying between them. No word was spoken, and so soft was their tread that it scarcely broke the oppressive silence of the evening.

Most of the guests at the hotel were still lingering over their dessert when the Arabs arrived with their unconscious burden, so that, without any commotion being caused, or any one being made aware of the accident, he was taken quietly to his room and laid on his bed, while a messenger was despatched with all possible haste for the nearest doctor.

An hour later, however, in the smoke-room and in the drawing-room, the matter was discussed with lowered voices and with bated breath. The doctor was still with the unconscious man, and one of the waiters had been despatched for a second doctor to consult with him. •

This of itself looked ominous, and the impression rapidly gained ground that the case was a very serious one. Downstairs Eric was the centre of interest, and his story was listened to with most profound attention. In a very modest way he narrated the part he had taken in the matter, making light of his march down the ravine with the unconscious man in his arms, but giving great praise to the Arabs who came so readily to his rescue.

There was to have been an entertainment in the drawing-room of the hotel that evening, but it was indefinitely postponed. No one seemed in the mood for either mirth or music, with the genial and kind-hearted American lying upstairs between life and death.

Every one knew Mr. Short. The reserve which everywhere characterises the Englishman was, in the American, conspicuous by its absence. He had never troubled himself about introductions. New-comers he welcomed with all the familiarity of old acquaintances. Now and then he got severely snubbed by some blue-blooded Briton, but he did not seem to mind.

"I guess such folks have no breeding to speak of," he would say between the whiffs of his cigar, if he alluded to the matter at all. And at the very first opportunity he would speak to them again.

In the long run he broke down all stiffness and reserve. His genuineness and sincerity were so conspicuous that they disarmed criticism, with the result that he soon established himself a general favourite.

Hence the news of his accident caused the most poignant grief throughout the hotel. And, as the evening wore away, the anxiety to know the verdict of the doctors became positive pain. In the smoke-room conversation became more and more fitful and spasmodic, till it finally ceased altogether, and men smoked on in silence, and watched with listless interest the blue wreaths of smoke curling above their heads.

At length there was a movement. The proprietor of the hotel entered, and every eye fastened upon his face in a moment.

"I am afraid it is all over with Monsieur Short," he said: "one of the doctors has left, the other remains with him." •

"And do they give no hope?" some one asked.

"He has recovered consciousness," was the reply, "and they have set his broken arm, but——" and he shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head.

"They think he will not pull through?"

"That is it; they think he will not get better," and with a bow he quietly left the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

*“WHAT IS TRUTH?”

“Truth only needs to be for once spoke out
And there’s such music in her, such strange rhythm,
As make men’s memories her joyous slaves,
And clings around the soul, as the sky clings
Round the mute earth, for ever beautiful.”

ANON.

PHILIP HARDMAN had made all his arrangements for leaving Algiers on the 2nd of March. He was anxious to see a little of the country before the hot season began; particularly was he desirous of seeing the cities of Constantine and Tunis, as well as the far-famed Oasis of Biskrah. He knew very well that if he got safe back to Priory Mere the chances were he would never leave it again. Moreover, it would be as pleasant to return by way of Tunis and Naples as by the way he had come, and, indeed, much more so. He knew that the boats called at Malta, where, if he liked, he could spend a week, and from Naples he could slowly work his way north, through Rome, Florence, Venice, and over the St. Gothard, into Switzerland, and home by way of the Rhine. Taking all these things into account, this seemed in every sense the more preferable way, and so he decided upon it.

He did not, however, unfold all his plans to Eric. He might have occasion to alter some of them, and so did not wish to compromise himself in any way.

Under other circumstances Eric would have accompanied his uncle with cheerfulness, for he had seen all there was to be seen in Algiers, and was eager for fresh fields and pastures new. But for Mr. Short’s sake he would have liked now to have remained a few days longer.

To leave the kindly American to die in a land of strangers seemed almost cruel. And though Mr. Short said but little, he knew that he felt his going away very acutely. The doctors gave no hope whatever of his recovery. A few days at most, they said, would see the end.

Eric ventured to suggest to his uncle that for the American's sake they might remain a few days longer, but Hardman was obdurate. He had made all arrangements, he said, had purchased tickets and engaged rooms, and to remain longer would dislocate everything.

Eric did not press the point, but in his heart he resented his uncle's stubbornness. He did not know that Hardman was as eager to get away as he was to remain. He wanted to see the end; Hardman wanted to be out of the house before the dark spectre of death entered it. He had never seemed to breathe freely since it was made known that the American was not likely to get better. The very thought of death filled him with a nameless horror and alarm. The room where the sick man lay was not far from his own, and he had lain awake for hours, listening and shuddering, wondering what that brooding mystery meant—wondering how he would feel when, like the American, he would lie waiting for the end.

Ah, it was easy enough, when in health and strength, to talk loftily about the "supreme good," and the "eternal silence"; yet somehow when in the hushed hours of the night he lay awake and listened for any sound that might come from the room of the dying man, death seemed a very awful thing.

"Not a day nor a night longer than I can help will I stay here," he said to himself. "I hope the man won't die before I go."

Eric spent nearly all his time by the bedside of his friend. Mr. Short was quite conscious, and fully sensible of the fact that the doctors gave no hope of his recovery. Yet he was not appalled, nor oppressed with useless regrets.

"It ain't as I would have planned," he said to Eric the morning after the accident. "But it can't be helped now. I shouldn't have done it, however, that's certain."

"Done what?" Eric asked.

"Tried to cut that sprig from the gum-tree," he an-

swered. "But, you see, I wanted something to whittle. It's a habit we get into."

"And did you overbalance yourself?"

"Nay, the rock gave way beneath me, and down we went of a heap." •

"It was very unfortunate," Eric said, after a pause.

"Yas, it does look like it. But then we don't know. Things ain't always what they seem."

"It will be a lesson to you, anyhow," Eric said, with affected cheerfulness.

"Nay, Eric," he answered, while a pleasant smile lit up his face. "It may be a lesson to you, and to a great many others, but not to me. I've nearly learned my last lesson. School's breaking up, lad, and I'm going home."

"Going home?" Eric questioned, with a look of surprise on his face.

"So the doctors say," he answered, "though somehow I don't feel exactly like it. But I suppose it's all right. Heaven's as near to Algiers as to Toledo. And going away a few years sooner or later don't make very much difference. If I could have had my choice I would have died quietly at home in Toledo, but the Lord knows best, and I ain't going to complain."

"Unfortunately, complaining never helps matters," Eric said. "If complaining would get you better one could complain hard enough."

Mr. Short smiled, and for a few minutes remained silent, while a dreamy expression stole into his half-closed eyes.

"I'm quite content," he said at length. "The Lord has stood by me now for many years, and He is with me still; His presence takes away the sting of death, and makes suffering almost sweet. I don't fear to go away into the darkness and silence. I don't go alone. He walks by my side—my friend, my all."

Eric shifted uneasily in his chair. Such talk seemed to have little or no meaning. Indeed, for the moment, he wondered whether or not Mr. Short might not be wandering in his mind.

"I don't think I quite understand you," he said at length; "and I don't want to disturb your faith with any doubts of my own."

"Disturb my faith, Eric? That would be difficult now.

What we have tested and proved for ourselves we abide by."

"But may we not be mistaken?" Eric questioned.

"In relation to some things, yes. In relation to others, no. The pain in my arm is real; I'm not mistaken about that. The peace in my heart is as real as the pain—aye, and more so."

"But you talk about Christ being with you," Eric said.

"I cannot understand that. Christ was the founder of your religion, I am told, as Mahomet was the founder of the religion of the Arabs. Both died many hundred years ago. How, then, can Christ be with you now?"

The American smiled again, then answered: "Christ was not only the founder of our religion, He is our religion. Christianity is His living presence and spirit in the world. He lives, and I live in Him."

Eric remained silent and Mr. Short closed his eyes, and for a while no other word was spoken. On a little table near, the sick man's watch ticked loudly, and from the rooms below came a subdued hum of voices, for the guests talked almost in whispers, lest they should disturb the suffering man.

"You think I am dreaming, Eric?" the words came slowly and feebly.

"Yes, I think you are," Eric answered, frankly.

"Well, be it so," the sick man answered. "Some day you will find the Light and the Truth and the Way."

"I have no desire to get into the bondage of superstition," was the reply.

"Bondage? Ah, Eric, truth is never bondage; truth is light and liberty."

"Yes; but what is truth?"

"This is truth," and Mr. Short turned his head and looked his companion full in the face. "Twenty years ago I was a drunkard and an outcast; I hated everything that was good and pure and sweet. I sneered at religion and religious people, I revelled in debauchery and corruption, and blasphemed night and day. I had the temper of a maniac, the disposition of a fiend, the heart of a reptile. You cannot conceive how mean I was, nor imagine the depth of my degradation. People looked upon me as an utter outcast. My friends gave me up at length as beyond

redemption; and remember, I did not want to be redeemed. I had no regret, no remorse, no desire for anything better. Then came the change, gentle as the dawn. Christ spoke to me, and I woke; He touched my heart and healed me, and lo! I was a new creature. Don't say it was a dream, Eric; call it a miracle if you like. I found myself with a new heart, the old hatred and passion had gone, the appetite for drink died in me, I turned away from my old pursuits with loathing. Instead of blaspheming I began to sing. My heart thrilled with love and pity. I wanted to help everybody, and to be kind to everything. That's twenty years ago, and by His grace and help and comfort, I have continued to this day. Will your uncle's philosophy explain this? Will science find an answer? I am not skilled in argument, I don't know what divines and sceptics argue about, I have but one answer to all objections: whereas once I hated, now I love. That answer is enough for me. You cannot persuade me out of what I know. I set my experience against all your quibbles. While you are guessing I am at rest; knowing one truth at least, and that truth has made me free."

Eric did not answer. To his fancy Mr. Short was still dreaming, or labouring under some pleasant delusion; and he had no wish to disturb him. He had closed his eyes again, as though exhausted with the effort he had made.

"Every one must believe something," was his mental reflection, "and if Mr. Short believes this, and finds comfort in the belief, it would be cruel now to disturb his serenity." The full force of the sick man's argument had not touched him yet. It seemed but the hallucination of a wandering mind.

After awhile Mr. Short spoke again. "You go away to-morrow, Eric?"

"Yes, to-morrow we turn our faces towards home."

"Yes, yes. You are going home, Eric; so am I. But we shall meet again."

"Then you think you will get better?"

"Get better? Oh, no. But out there, beyond the shadow of death is a fairer world than this."

"Death is eternal silence," Eric said, abruptly.

"Nay, nay, it is rather eternal song."

Eric looked at him for a few moments in silence, then rose to go.

"You will look in again, Eric, before you go," and the sick man held out a feeble hand.

"Yes, I will come in again; perhaps more than once," and he turned quickly away and left the room.

Out in the garden he encountered his uncle. "Well, Eric," was his greeting, "have you all your things packed?"

"Nearly all," was the reply.

"We leave at noon to-morrow, you know; so don't drive things to the last minute."

"I will be quite ready," he said.

"Have you seen the American lately?"

"I have just come from his room."

"And is he likely to live much longer?"

"I don't know. He seems to me to be gradually sinking."

"I hope he won't die before we leave, anyhow. I suppose he is meeting his fate like a Stoic?"

"He would say like a Christian," was the quiet answer.

Hardman curled his lip. "Has he been trying to make a convert of you?" he said, after a pause.

"And if he has?" Eric questioned, quietly.

"Oh, nothing. You are old enough now to discriminate between truth and falsehood. I hope you have brains enough, that's all."

"I hope I shall use what I have, at any rate," was the reply.

"Right; I hope you will, and your eyes also. It is possible you will see many things of interest before you reach England."

"Indeed."

"You know, of course, we go to Constantine and Tunis?"

"Yes, you told me that this morning."

"Well, I did think of taking ship from Tunis back to Marseilles, but I have almost decided on another route."

Eric looked interested, but said nothing.

"Of course time and circumstances decide many things," Hardman went on, "but I have thought of going on to

Naples, and then of working our way through Italy into Switzerland, and down the Rhine."

"Down the Rhine, uncle?" and his heart gave a great throb.

"Mind you, this is only tentative," Hardman said, uneasily, feeling as though he had let out more than he ought to have done.

"I quite understand," Eric replied, calmly.

"That's right; now get your packing done so that there is no delay to-morrow," and Hardman turned and walked away down the garden path.

Eric watched him for a few minutes, and then struck off in the opposite direction. One thought was in his heart. If they went down the Rhine he might see Claire. Bonn was on the banks of the Rhine, and Claire was at Bonn, and the place was not so big but he might easily find her. For awhile this thought banished everything else from his mind; even Mr. Short was forgotten.

On and on he walked, seeing nothing and hearing nothing. One picture filled his imagination—the face of Claire. Not as he saw her last, with laughing eyes, and a wealth of sunny hair streaming in the wind; but as Homer had described her in his letter, with a face a little more grave, but radiant with a truer beauty. With hair twisted in a shining coil at the back of her head, and eyes deep with thought and liquid with tenderness.

How would they meet? Would she welcome him as in the old days? Would she recognise him at all? No doubt he had altered much, and so had she. But they would scarcely fail to know each other. Oh! how he would enjoy her look of surprise when he stood before her; and how his heart would thrill when she placed her hand in his and pronounced his name.

So he communed with himself, and pictured their meeting over and over again. Such a blissful day dream he had not had for many a long month. So sweet was it that he made no effort to put it aside. On the contrary, he confessed to himself that he would like to go on dreaming until he should wake to the sweeter reality.

On reaching the hill-top he sat down, and surveyed the fair scene stretched out around him. In front was the bay, with its shining waters stretching away beyond the

reach of vision, and encircled on the nearer side with a great sweep of green hills. On the distant Atlas mountains the winter's snow was still lying and glistening in the sunshine like burnished silver; while to the left the quaint Oriental City, with its white domes and flat roofs, rose steeply from the water's edge.

"It is a fair prospect," he mused, as he rested his elbows on his knees, and placed his face in his hands; and then, as in a flash, the words of Mr. Short came back to him: "Out there, beyond the shadow of death, is a fairer world than this."

What if the American were right? Was the presumption so very unreasonable? Christian and Mahometan alike believed in this heaven of rest and blessedness, that lay beyond the storm and stress of earth. As far as he could learn, immortality was denied by a few only, and was the opinion of the few to outweigh the belief of the many?

He rose at length with a pained and puzzled expression in his eyes. "If superstition is bondage," he said, "so is ignorance. And if the Christian's faith is a Will-o'-the-wisp, what then? Mr. Short is dying in a fool's paradise. And if so, is the fool's paradise worse than the philosopher's desert? Oh, dear, I must get these thoughts out of my head, or they will spoil everything." And he started off at a swinging pace down the hill-side.

The next day he and his uncle sailed away for Philipville, *en route* for Constantine. Most of the morning he spent with Mr. Short, who appeared to be sinking fast, but who was as bright and cheerful as on the day when first they met.

"I've settled everything, Eric," he said, with a smile, "packed all my traps as it were, and am just waiting for the word of command to raise the anchor and sail away. You are going to Constantine, Eric, I'm going home. Would you mind reading to me a bit before you go?"

"Not at all," Eric said, with an effort, for a lump had risen in his throat in spite of every attempt to keep it down.

"On the table is a Testament. If you will turn to the fourteenth chapter of St. John, and read a few verses, I shall be very glad."

"Could you find the place for me?" Eric said, "for I know nothing of the book."

"What! have you never read it?"

"Never!"

For a few moments they looked at each other in silence. Then Mr. Short took the book and slowly turned the leaves until he found the place.

Quietly, and with much feeling, Eric read the words, beginning, "Let not your hearts be troubled," read on to the final words of the chapter, "Arise, let us go hence." Then silence fell.

The American was the first to speak. "You did your best to save my life, Eric. You have comforted me much while I have lain here. I can never repay you. But if you will accept this little book, and some day when you have time read it through, it may be the means of saving your life."

"I will read it for your sake, if for nothing else," Eric said, with a swift rush of tears to his eyes.

"That is enough. Now farewell. We shall surely meet again."

Eric grasped the feeble hand upon the coverlet and held it in silence. He tried to speak, but could not. Then slowly the clasped hands relaxed, and turning swiftly on his heel he left the room.

CHAPTER XX.

DRIFTING.

“ Oh, the little more, and how much it is !
And the little less, and what worlds away.
Now a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the blood’s best play,
And life be a proof of this.”

BROWNING.

It was towards the end of May when Eric found himself on the deck of one of the Rhine steamers, gliding swiftly down the waters of that far-famed river, his heart beating high with hope and expectation. Since leaving Algiers, he and his uncle had been travelling from place to place, avoiding long journeys, and avoiding any lengthened stay in any particular spot. At Tunis they had spent a fortnight, but that was unavoidable. There was only a weekly service of boats to Malta, and when the first boat departed the weather was so boisterous that Hardman declared he would rather remain in Tunis a month than go to sea in such a gale.

Eric was very impatient at the delay, but his uncle seemed rather pleased than otherwise; he liked Tunis; it was more Oriental than Algiers. The bazaars were a never-failing source of interest and attraction, besides which he had made the acquaintance of a gentleman who had proved himself to be a man after his own heart.

The day after their arrival he and Eric had driven out to Carthage, and while wandering over the mounds of broken bricks and mortar—nearly the only remnants of that ancient and once powerful city—they stumbled across the gentleman in question.

He was busily engaged in making a sketch of one of the cisterns, but he put away his book directly Hardman and Eric appeared, and entered into conversation with them.

He was a man of uncertain age, with a clean-shaven face, thin lips, prominent Roman nose, and dark, deep-set eyes. His hair was long, and curled a little at the end; while astride his nose was a pair of round-eyed German spectacles.

Hardman was impressed with his appearance from the first, so, in fact, was Eric, only in another way. At a distance, he looked a man of twenty-five or thirty, on a nearer approach he looked, at the very least, ten years older.

He might have been an actor, or an artist, or a priest who had doffed his clerical attire, or a University professor. As a matter of fact, however, he was neither, though later in the day, when he and Hardman had got on friendly terms, he informed the latter that he had been educated for the Church, but found it impossible to swallow her dogmas, and so had taken to literature as the only means of earning a livelihood, and was now engaged in writing a History of the Rise and Decay of Religions.

This statement won Hardman's heart directly. It was a subject he was very much interested in, though he knew little or nothing about it. Hence all the more reason he should cultivate the stranger's acquaintance. He foresaw clearly enough that he might yet have to meet Eric in argument, and he wished to be prepared for any encounter that might arise; to be able to show that religions, like every other thing, had but a limited existence—that they flourished only for a while, and then decayed—would be a great point gained. The meeting with this stranger was quite a stroke of good fortune.

Mr. Hardman's antiquarian tastes led him out to Carthage again and again, and each time Mr. Herbert Saville willingly accompanied him. Eric also made one of the party, not that he particularly enjoyed rambling over the heaps of rubbish, or through the broken cisterns, but he preferred the fresh air of the seaside to the foul smells of Tunis, and often wondered how it was that a city so beautifully situated as Carthage had fallen into such utter ruin, while Tunis, lying low between two lakes, in the worst possible situation, had lived and flourished for thousands of years.

Mr. Saville waxed eloquent when he spoke of the rise and fall of Carthage. He had been reading up on the

subject, and was pleased to air his knowledge to such an attentive listener as Hardman. Eric left them to do their scrambling over the rubbish heaps alone as much as possible. He was neither fascinated by Mr. Saville's presence nor charmed by his eloquence.

Now and then, however, he was almost compelled to listen to his talk, whether he would or no. He was lying one afternoon on the slope of the hill above the ancient harbour looking across the magnificent bay to the distant hills beyond, when his uncle and Mr. Saville came and sat by his side.

"Splendid site for a city, Mr. Hardman," Saville said, with a wave of his hand.

"Magnificent," was the reply.

"Ah, if these old stones could speak what a tale they would unfold," Mr. Saville went on. "There is something almost pathetic in the complete and utter ruin of a city that disputed at one time the supremacy of Rome itself."

"It is very strange," said Hardman. He generally confined his answers to a single word or sentence. If he said more he might betray how little he knew, by being almost silent he might convey the impression that there were vast stores of knowledge behind.

"Here," said Saville, with a wave of his hand, "Christianity won some of its greatest successes. Here churches sprang up in all directions. Here bishoprics were founded——"

"On all hands," interposed Hardman.

"Yes; on all hands. But where are they now? Where can you find a visible sign that they once existed? As far as this great country is concerned, Christianity is——"

"*Non est*," ejaculated Mr. Hardman.

"Quite right," said Mr. Saville, "I see that you are acquainted with the subject. Here we have the prophecy of what Christianity will be everywhere; and the more rankly it grows the sooner will it decay. In Carthage it has been dead for centuries; in Rome it is in the throes of death; in Paris and Berlin decay has eaten deeply into its heart; in London, even, its leaves are beginning to fall. And I quite anticipate when my book comes out, it will be to it like a winter's frost; it will shrivel up and die."

Eric had listened to the conversation with growing impatience ; but upon this deliverance he rose quickly to his feet and marched away.

"Your nephew does not appear to take much interest in these subjects," Mr. Saville remarked, when Eric was out of ear-shot.

"I hardly know," said Hardman, taking off his spectacles and wiping them. "To tell you the truth, I can't quite make him out. He is not a great talker, by any means, particularly on subjects of this character. Perhaps he thinks all the more."

"The lines upon which you have educated him I consider quite unique. I shall always feel curious to know what the result will be. It is to be hoped he will keep out of the toils of the parsons. If they get hold of him no one can tell what the end will be."

"We are not troubled with parsons at Priory Mero," Hardman observed, cynically.

"So much the better," was the reply. "You see, I know the stuff of which they are made. I know the sort of training they get. I know the drift of their teaching. I have been through the mill, and so do not speak as an outsider."

"Then you do not think highly of 'the cloth,'" said Hardman.

"Well, you see," Saville replied, and his dark eyes gleamed while he spoke, "I do not blame the men so much as the system. If they had courage to cut themselves free they would be different. But the system itself is fatal to the development of grit, and courage, and honesty, and backbone."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. The less they are bitten by their religion the better they are. You see, people take their religion as they take any other infectious disease. Small-pox, for instance—some take it very mildly indeed, and it scarcely leaves a mark upon them ; but others take it badly ; it not only infects their blood, but it touches their brain. If you come across such, be careful of them, and be sure and count your spoons."

Hardman laughed. Here was a new illustration for him, which he might use in the days to come.

"My book will be a revelation when it comes out,"

Saville remarked after a pause, and then his thin lips closed like a vice.

"I shall be delighted to purchase it," Hardman said. "The world wants light on many subjects."

"The great difficulty," said Saville, with energy, "is the first cost. A shilling shocker or a trashy three-volume novel any publisher will take up; but a work such as mine, the author has generally to take the risk."

"But he soon gets recouped," said Hardman.

"A truly great work does not take the world by storm in a moment. It must have time to pierce the hard skull of prejudice and bigotry, but once let it begin to move, and then, like an avalanche, it will carry all before it."

"Yes, that's it," Hardman observed, with a smile.

"But until it begins to move the author may starve," said Saville. "Moreover, suppose he has not the money to lay down at the outset."

"But you do not mean——" Hardman began.

"Yes, I do mean," Saville interrupted. "For the sake of truth and honour I gave up my profession. I have spent most of my patrimony in pursuing my investigations in this and many lands. My work is nearly completed; but it will take two or three years to see it through the press."

"And in the meanwhile?" questioned Hardman.

"In the meanwhile I require work and money. I propose offering myself as a private tutor whenever I see an opening. To you, sir, that may seem *infra dig.*, but work, I deem it, is no disgrace. A tutorship would leave me leisure to correct the proof sheets of my work, the salary would help me to pay for its production."

Mr. Hardman cast upon his companion a look of admiration, then slowly rose to his feet, and a few moments later the two men walked away together.

But their conversation did not cease; on the contrary, it became more and more animated, and to all appearances more and more interesting. Eric from a distance watched them walking arm-in-arm down the slope of the hill, but he did not attempt to join them. Mr. Saville might be a very learned man and a very good talker, but for him his conversation had no charm and his presence no attraction.

On the day they left Tunis Mr. Saville came down to La Gollette to see them off. Fortunately, the day was fine

and the sea smooth. Eric dreaded a breeze, lest his uncle should delay his departure another week. He was impatient to be on the move; he felt how that every mile traversed would be a mile nearer that fair Rhine country where Claire dwelt, and just then he would rather see Claire's face than any picture that either nature or art had to show.

The parting between Hardman and Saville was so affectionate, and yet so cheerful, that there might have been some secret understanding between them, or a hope of speedy reunion. Eric was glad to see the last of his face, and had no anticipation whatever that they would ever meet again.

Hardman was annoyed that Eric had shown so little appreciation of Saville's company, and a few days later, while they loitered through the "Armoury" at Malta, told him so.

"I don't understand you, Eric," he said, adjusting his glasses, and compressing his thin lips.

Eric looked up in surprise. "Understand what?" he questioned.

"Let us sit in this corridor," he answered. "We shall not be disturbed here, and I feel a bit tired."

"I am quite agreeable," was the answer, and they seated themselves side by side.

"The things I would naturally expect you to be interested in," Hardman went on, as though there had been no break in the conversation, "are just the things you don't care for; and the people I would like you to know you almost snub."

"I was not aware of it," Eric answered.

"It is true, nevertheless. Mr. Saville, for instance, is a gentleman—an educated, cultured gentleman—a profoundly learned gentleman, I might say—and yet you were scarcely civil to him; while that American, Mr. Short, who by no stretch of the imagination can be considered a gentleman, you made a bosom companion of."

"I admit there is force in what you say," Eric answered, after a pause, "but I suppose in a matter of this kind we are governed largely by our instincts."

"In which case you are paying your instincts no compliment," was the reply.

"Thank you, uncle," Eric answered, with heightened colour. "But if Mr. Saville is your ideal I might say the same of you."

Hardman fairly gasped. "Eric," he said, "do you know who you are speaking to?"

"I have no wish to be disrespectful," was the firm but quiet answer. "Neither do I think I am called upon to sit and say nothing while I am 'charged to my face with possessing vulgar tastes."

"I did not say so," Hardman said, savagely.

"But you implied it, uncle."

For a few moments there was silence; then Hardman rose to his feet. "Look here," he said, in a milder tone, "let us not quarrel, I am beginning to think we shall never see alike."

"I don't think it is necessary we should," Eric answered, and then the subject dropped. Yet both felt that there was a barrier gradually growing up between them. In Algiers Eric had cared more for Mr. Short's company than his uncle's; and in Tunis, Hardman had practically dropped Eric for the sake of Saville, and now that they were thrown together again they had come perilously near a quarrel.

It was not a pleasant feeling, but it was there, so fixed and rooted that it would not be put aside. Fortunately, in each and all the places they visited there were sufficient objects of interests to absorb nearly all their thoughts and attention.

And yet Eric was impatient to get on faster. The short voyage from Malta to Naples seemed terribly long. He was eager to set foot once more on European soil. In dreams of the night and in his musings during the day, the beautiful Rhine country was constantly before him. In Naples and Pompeii, in Rome and Florence, in Venice and Milan, in Como and Lucerne, he missed one-half the pleasure he might otherwise have got, in his impatience to be speeding north.

To his uncle, however, he said nothing, nor did Hardman guess for a moment the feelings that consumed him. Outwardly he was calm and self-possessed. If a suggestion was made that they should stay a day or two longer in any given place he raised no objection, but when night

time came he paced his room like a caged bear, and bit his nails with vexation.

In those days of wandering through Italy they did not indulge much in conversation. There was very little in common between them; their tastes lay in opposite directions; they viewed the same things from different standpoints. Hence, though they spent all their days in each other's company, and often large portions of the nights, they did not get any nearer to each other in thought or feeling.

On the contrary, they seemed to drift further and further apart—not intentionally; indeed, both strove hard to break down this invisible barrier, to speak and act as though no shadow of restraint had come between them, and each wondered if the other felt this growing restraint, or if it was felt by himself alone.

So the days sped on and grew into weeks, and evermore as they travelled north they felt they were treading on the heels of beautiful spring. After Pompeii and Rome and Venice, Como and Lucerne were like a benediction. Fairer than sculpture, grander than any picture ever wrought by the art of man, were the glorious mountains, the sombre pine forests, the foaming cataracts, the placid lakes set in their frames of giant hills. Eric was a true lover of nature: the sweet restfulness of the country possessed for him a charm that no town or city could ever have. The first glimpse he got of the snow-mountains moved him strangely. Such a sense of awe and reverence came over him as he had never before experienced. They seemed so vast, so white, so pure, so far above earth's toil and tumult, so near to heaven, so moveless in their majesty and strength, that he could only look at them in silent wonder.

He had been deeply impressed with the vast magnitude of the Colosseum at Rome; had gazed up into the dome of St. Peter's until his head reeled; had looked with never-ceasing wonder at Giotto's tower in Florence; had marvelled at the exceeding beauty of the cathedral at Milan; but in comparison with these gleaming pinnacles of snow all those things seemed as nothing.

"If this were my home I should never want to leave it," he said to his uncle one day.

"Indeed," was the reply, and the subject dropped.

Eric almost forgot Claire in those days of sunshine and pleasure, while the memory of Mr. Short was rapidly fading from his brain.

It was now, however, Hardman's turn to be impatient. He had received no letter from Homer for many weeks, and he was getting anxious to know how affairs were progressing at Priory Mere. So they turned their faces once more towards the north, and a couple of days after leaving Lucerne they found themselves, as we have before intimated, on the deck of one of the Rhine steamers, floating downwards with the stream.

CHAPTER XXI.

ERIC GETS IMPATIENT.

"So, I shall see her in three days
And just one night; but nights are short,
Then two long hours, and that is morn.
See how I come, unchanged, unworn!
Feel, when my life broke off from thine,
How fresh the splinters keep and fine—
Only a touch and we combine!"

BROWNING.

DIRECTLY Eric left Lucerne all his impatience returned, and with two-fold intensity. For once he and his uncle were in perfect agreement, they were both eager to push on with as little delay as possible. There had been some talk of spending a few days at Baden Baden, but the idea was quickly given up.

"There is nothing more to see, Eric," Hardman said the morning they left Bâle.

"There's the Rhine, uncle," Eric interposed.

"But that will seem but a tame affair after all we have seen."

"No doubt it will, and yet it has doubtless a charm of its own, just as Priory Mere has."

"The truth is," said Hardman, peevishly, "I am getting impatient to be back home."

"So am I for some things," Eric answered, "and yet I fancy I shall enjoy the sail down the river."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so, but I doubt it."

The morning, however, when they sailed away from Bingen proved to be a glorious one, and as a consequence Hardman was in his most gracious mood. Among the passengers he found some genial companions, while the scenery, if not exactly grand, he admitted was picturesque and romantic.

It was his intention when he left Bingen to go straight forward to Cologne, but during the morning he changed his mind. Many of the passengers were going to spend a night at Coblenz, and they persuaded him to do the same.

This was a great disappointment to Eric. It meant lengthening out the misery of suspense another twenty-four hours; besides which he feared it might mean cutting short their stay at Cologne, and so rendering his visit to Bonn impossible.

Moreover, now that he was within a day's journey of the latter place, he tortured himself with the fear that though he might reach Bonn he might not find the object of his search. The fates had been so cruel to him in the past, and had so persistently conspired to keep him and Claire apart, that he was half afraid that his ill fortune in this respect might still follow him, and that he might reach the school at Bonn only to discover that the bird had flown.

For the first time he raised a feeble protest against his uncle's decision, and when he found him determined, he was half disposed to go on alone, and let him follow the next day; but he thought better of it before reaching Coblenz. He knew that such a course would make his uncle terribly angry, and there was not such a fund of good feeling existing between them that he could afford to waste any of it. So he braced himself to the inevitable, and bore his disappointment without a further word of complaint.

It was well on in the afternoon of the following day when Eric discovered that they were getting within sight of Bonn. To the right were the Drachenfels, looking gloomy and forbidding, and in the distance the spires of Cologne pierced the sky.

During all the journey he had sat apart from the other passengers, silent and unresponsive. Once or twice his uncle had joined him, but finding him in no mood for conversation had left him to his thoughts.

"I suppose they all think I am a bear," he said to himself once, with a poor attempt at a smile. "But I can't help it. Claire is like no one else. She is the only real friend I have ever had except Mr. Short, and he, poor

fellow, is dead long ere this. And then I have been disappointed so often, and have waited so long to see her, that my heart is in a regular tumult."

And he compressed his lips into a smile that had more of bitterness in it than anything else.

"I don't know what I shall do if I find when I get there that she has gone," he went on. "I shall be too mad to contain myself, and too disappointed to be civil. If I don't use strong language in such a case, and frighten uncle out of his seven senses, it will be what Homer calls a miracle. Poor old Homer, won't he be glad to have us home again," and he lay back in his seat and closed his eyes; but his dream was not of Homer, but of Claire.

Yet he never thought of himself in the light of a lover. He was Claire's friend, she was his. For six happy months they had been thrown together, and had been all in all to each other. She had become part of his life, whatever he might be to her. The world might change, and men might come and go; and he and Claire might never see each other again, but in his heart her image would always abide. She was Claire, and there never could be another like her, so he thought; and if he lived to be as old as Methuselah he would always think of her as the fairest maiden that ever trod the earth.

So while he mused the time passed on, and at length Bonn loomed into sight.

Then he roused himself and hurried off to find his uncle.

"Shall we land here, uncle?" he said, touching him on the arm.

"So you're awake at last, are you?" Hardman answered, with a frown.

"I'm not aware that I've been asleep," was the mild reply.

"Not asleep, eh? Then you might have been, for any thing you have seen or learnt."

"Perhaps I have seen more than you give me credit for," he answered. "But that is not the question. The guide-book says it is sometimes a saving of time to land here and go on to Cologne by train."

"It may be so," was the ungracious reply; "but it is no saving of trouble."

"I was not thinking of the trouble," Eric replied.

"You need not have told me that," was the answer; "taking trouble is not one of your strong points."

Eric bit his lip for a moment, then turned away with the remark, "I am sorry if I have offended you"; and then made for the side of the boat, for they were rapidly nearing the place of landing.

On the small wharf or pier quite a number of people had gathered, most of them, it appeared, with the expectation of meeting friends. Eric scanned their faces in a listless kind of way as the boat came gradually to a standstill. He had little expectation of seeing any face he knew, and yet his heart beat just a little faster, for this was Bonn—the place he had often pictured in his dreams, the place which for months he had been longing to reach.

The reality, however, was very unlike his dreams. The place was much smaller than he had anticipated. On the whole, he was rather pleased than otherwise at that, for he imagined that on the following morning when he came in search of Claire he would have less difficulty in finding her.

He was feeling just then very annoyed with his uncle. He had hoped that they would land at Bonn, and that he might have persuaded him to stay there for the night. What now, if when he got on to Cologne, his uncle insisted on leaving early the next morning? Where, then, would be his dream of meeting Claire? Truly the fates seemed all against him.

By this time most of the passengers were crowding round the gangways. Some few indeed had already landed. On the wharf were handshakings and laughter and guttural ejaculations that Eric could not understand.

Then from the little crowd emerged a group of girls, or more correctly of young ladies. They came to the edge of the wharf to watch the boat glide away. One of them, Eric remembered, had been a passenger during part of the journey from Coblenz, but he did not remember just then at what place she had come on board.

They were evidently in a cheerful humour, and it was clear that some one was still on board they knew, for they kept making signals and throwing kisses.

Eric watched them for a few moments with languid interest, for their broad Dutch faces and swarthy complexions did not greatly attract him. Then suddenly he straightened

himself and shaded his eyes with his hand, for the level sun rays were very trying. One face in the little group was unlike all others. It was a fair face and almost classic in shape.

The boat was on the move again now, and for a few moments he glided nearer and nearer the laughing girls.

Then suddenly he made a rush for the gangway, but too late, the boat had glided away. "Claire," he called, but she did not heed him. His voice was lost amid the general noise and confusion. He took off his hat and waved it frantically; but her eyes were fixed on some one at the other end of the boat. He saw her white hand uplifted, her bonny face wreathed in smiles, then the distance swiftly widened till face and form alike were undistinguishable, and Claire had vanished from him once more.

For several minutes he remained in the same position, straining his eyes over the widening stretch of water, then, with a sigh, he turned away and sought the seat he had previously occupied. That momentary glimpse of Claire's sweet face had set his heart throbbing wildly; and though he knew his uncle was resenting being left so much alone, he felt that he could not rejoin him until he had recovered himself a little.

Around the big bend of the river the boat swept on. But Eric heeded nothing. Hardman paced the deck with a frown upon his face, impatient to reach his destination, but his nephew did not heed him. For the moment he was oblivious of everything but the one fact, that he had seen Claire, and that Claire was just like the Claire of old. He knew he had not been mistaken. Mistaken? He smiled contemptuously at the thought. Was there another face in the world like hers? Another mouth so firm, and yet so sweet? Impossible. She might be a little older looking; taller she certainly was, with a carriage a shade more stately and sedate, but she was still Claire, fair and lovely as of old.

Before the boat reached Cologne he had recovered his calmness, and more than recovered his serenity. Indeed, he felt as though a weight had been taken from his heart. The haunting fear that had depressed him for days past was entirely dispelled. Certainty had banished misgiving. A few hours more, and then—and then——

He left his seat and joined his uncle ; pretended not to notice his stiffness and reserve, chatted pleasantly about the incidents of the journey, told funny stories about the passengers, and made himself generally so agreeable that Hardman was compelled at length to relent.

"You seem to have recovered yourself, Eric," he said ironically.

"I believe I have, uncle," was the reply ; "the truth is, I haven't felt at all up to the mark during the day."

"You didn't say you were unwell."

"Well, no ; it was nothing to make a fuss about. I simply did not feel very bright, that was all."

"And what medicine have you had to cure you ?"

"I have had no medicine at all," he answered, with a blush.

"H'm," and Hardman took off his glasses and wiped them ; then added, after a pause, "I hope there will be no relapse, for you certainly have not been a very entertaining companion for many days past."

"I am very sorry," was the reply, "but it can't be helped now."

"No ; I suppose not. But for one who is *very sorry* I must say you look *very cheerful*," said Hardman, with a frown.

Eric laughed. "I want to be as cheerful as I can," he said. "But here is Cologne at last."

It was well, perhaps, that the thread of their conversation was broken at this point by the bustle of landing ; for had their talk continued much longer, Eric's cheerfulness would have vanished more rapidly than it had come. As it was, he was in the highest spirits during all the evening.

"One night more—which would vanish quickly in the forgetfulness of sleep—and then he would be with Claire," was the burden of all his thoughts.

By the first convenient train in the morning he would hurry back to Bonn. So he had planned. That Claire would be allowed to spend the day with him he did not doubt, and in that pleasant Rhine country they would renew the acquaintance that had been broken by so many intervening years.

How long his uncle would be disposed to stay at Cologne he did not know, for hitherto he had been studiously

silent on the subject; but he feared that one day only would be the extent of his tarrying, for he knew that he was getting impatient to see Priory Mere once more.

Still, one whole day with Claire would atone for a great deal, and would ease the hunger of his heart, until she returned to spend Christmas at Lindon Hall.

So the hours of the evening wore away till nearly bedtime. He was getting ready to retire for the night when a knock came to the door that separated his room from his uncle's.

"Yes, uncle," he called.

"Are you busy? Can you spare me a few minutes," was the response.

"I am at your service," he said, shooting back the bolt on his side the door.

"Then come here," and the next moment the door was thrown open.

"Take a chair," Hardman said, as he advanced to the table with a railway guide in his hand. "I have been looking up the time tables," he went on, "and I find our best plan will be to leave here by the first train to-morrow morning for Brussels."

Eric's heart sank, but he said nothing.

"If we don't do that," Hardman continued, "we shall land in London on Saturday night, and shall have to wait there till Monday for a train to travel home by."

"Well, I see nothing very objectionable in that," Eric said, feeling angry and desperate.

"You don't! Then let me tell you that I do."

"Why or wherefore?" Eric asked.

"Because London on a Sunday is the most deadly dull and stupid place on the face of the earth, thanks to Christian superstition and stupidity."

"Then why not spend Sunday in Paris? You know I have not seen Paris yet."

"Well, that would be more sensible," Hardman said, after a pause. "But the truth is, I want, in the first place to get home as soon as possible; and in the second place, I don't want to spend an hour longer in this foul-smelling city than I can possibly help."

"And have you decided to go by the early train to-morrow morning?"

"I have."

"Quite decided?"

"Yes; I called you here to let you know, so that you might not be late in the morning."

Eric rose to his feet, looking very white and desperate.

"Look here, uncle," he said. "So far, I have yielded to your wishes in everything, and yielded without a murmur; but in this matter I will not yield without a protest."

Hardman glared at him as though too astonished to speak.

"I mean what I say," Eric went on. "I had set my heart on going on to Bonn to-morrow to see Claire. You might have known I should want to see her, and yet you deliberately plan and contrive that we shall not meet."

Hardman got up and clenched his hands. "You dare to reply to me in this way," he hissed.

"I dare anything," Eric said, drawing himself up to his full height. "I am no longer a child, though you would treat me as one."

"And I have maintained you all these years for this!"

"Ah! you fling my maintenance in my teeth, and so I am your slave. Be it so. I have no intention of disobeying; but I claim my right as a man to protest against what I conceive to be cruelly inconsiderate and unfair."

Hardman curled his lip with scorn. "A man, eh?" he said with a sneer. "We shall see. Anyhow, if you had asked me in a proper spirit to remain here a day or two I would have considered it. Now we go by the first train to-morrow morning. Your protests weigh nothing with me." And walking to the door he opened it, and bowed Eric out.

CHAPTER XXII.

A REVELATION.

“Come back with me to the first of all,
Let us lean and love it over again,
Let us now forget and now recall,
Break the rosary in a pearly rain,
And gather what we let fall.”

BROWNING.

ERIC awoke next morning with a sense of impending trouble, with a vague and half-defined feeling that something unpleasant had happened or was going to happen. It had been well on into the small hours before he had fallen asleep. When his uncle had so unceremoniously bowed him out of the room the night before, his anger was at boiling point. In all his life he never remembered a feeling so bitter taking possession of him. To his distorted imagination, his uncle's conduct was heartless and cruel in the extreme. He did not consider that Philip Hardman would look at the matter from a very different standpoint; that what to him would seem such a cruel disappointment would seem to the older man no disappointment at all. Hardman did not know of his eager hope and anticipation; had never associated Bonn with his homeward journey by way of the Rhine; had never thought of Claire when Bonn was mentioned; had never received a hint from Eric that he wanted to visit his old companion.

Eric, however, never thought of these things. Claire had so filled his thoughts, so dominated his heart, that it seemed impossible his uncle should never think of her at all. Hence his eagerness to get away from Cologne seemed part of a deliberate purpose to annoy and disappoint him.

So he lay tossing hour after hour, nursing his wrath, and biting his lips with disappointment. To be so near to

Claire, to be almost within sight of her home, and yet be denied the privilege of seeing her—with the exception of that momentary glance from the ship's deck—was a disappointment more bitter than any he had ever known before.

The hope had been so bright and so sweet. It had come to him after such a long delay. It had cheered him through so many weeks of wandering, had relieved the tedium of so many weary journeys, that to have it dashed from him now, when on the very point of realisation, was a thousand times worse than if the hope had never gladdened him at all.

So the night wore away, till the grey dawn began to steal through the windows, and then Eric fell into a heavy and dreamless sleep, and awoke several hours later, as we have before intimated, with a sense of impending trouble pressing upon him. For several seconds he was unable to gather together his scattered senses, or even to remember where he was. Then, as in a flash, the angry altercation of the previous evening came back to him, and he turned away his face from the window with something like a groan. He was not the one, however, to try to shirk an unpleasant thing when he knew it had to be done.

"We have to be off by the 8.30 train," he said to himself, "so I had better be getting ready," and he jumped out of bed without further ado, and picked up his watch, which was lying on the dressing table.

"Well, now, here's a stupid trick," he said as his eye fell upon the dial. "How did I forget, I wonder, to wind my watch up."

Then he held it to his ear and discovered that it was ticking away steadily enough.

"Surely," he said, while a bewildered look stole into his eyes, "it can't be a quarter to nine o'clock," and he rushed across to the door that led to his uncle's room and knocked. Gently at first, but there was no response; then louder, and after a moment a sleepy voice answered—

"Yes, well, who's there?"

"It is I, uncle. Do you know what time it is?"

"No; gracious, we haven't overslept ourselves, have we?"

"We have, unless my watch has been playing me tricks," Eric answered.

"And I forgot to give orders to be called," Hardman

said, rolling out of bed with a thud, and stumping heavily across the floor. "Why, bless my senses," he called, "it's nearly nine o'clock."

"That's what my watch says," Eric answered.

"And the train goes at half-past eight."

"So you say," Eric replied.

"Thunder and lightning, and we are left behind."

"Evidently!"

"Evidently! and in a foul smelling place like this, where we are almost certain to take fever."

"If we escaped in Tunis and Rome, we are not likely to take much harm here," Eric answered, getting into his clothes at the same time as rapidly as possible.

"You think not, eh?"

"That is my opinion."

"Because you will get out of it as soon as possible, and go back to Bonn, I presume."

"With your permission."

"You can go to Jericho if you like," was the answer; to which Eric made no reply.

He had looked up the trains the day before, and he discovered that if he was prepared to go without breakfast for once, he would just have time to catch the next train.

Now breakfast was an institution that Eric never thought lightly of. Indeed, he had the profoundest respect for it, and generally showed his respect by doing ample justice to the fare that was set before him. But for Claire's sake he felt he would not mind sacrificing a hundred breakfasts.

When next his uncle called him he got no response; for Eric was already out of the house, and on his way to the station. Another minute and he would have been too late.

"Just in time," he chuckled to himself, with a smile of satisfaction, as he flung himself into a corner, and the train began to glide slowly out of the station.

But how long and tedious the journey seemed. The summer's sunshine was flooding all the country and lighting up the distant hills with wondrous beauty; but he did not heed it. He lay back in his corner with closed eyes, dreaming of Claire.

"At last, at last!" he kept saying to himself; "and by a fluke, too. Anyhow, I was the first to awake, so he can't blame me."

Then he laughed softly to himself. "Talk about the early bird catching the worm," he went on, "it's the late bird this time, and won't the worm be surprised."

Then his humour changed. "I hope I shall not find her stiff, and prim, and cold," he said. "These last five years must have wrought great changes; but if, instead of the Claire of old, I find—well—a prim young lady, I shall be dreadfully disappointed."

So he communed with himself, and tormented his heart with a hundred fears, while the train crawled its slow way nearer and yet nearer Bonn. At length it pulled up at the station, and Eric was out in a moment.

He had no difficulty in finding the school. It was a well-known institution in the town; and the first person of whom he inquired directed him straight to the door.

A few minutes later he was trying to make a servant maid understand what he wanted, but with very indifferent success, his broken German being almost more bewildering to her than his hurried English; so showing him into a pleasant and nicely-furnished sitting-room, she hurried away to find some one who might be able to understand the handsome stranger.

Eric threw himself into a chair near the window, and waited for several minutes with a fair amount of patience, then he got up and walked about the room, and tried to interest himself in the water-colour drawings that adorned the walls; finally, he stood before a tall mirror which occupied the space between two windows and began to criticise his personal appearance.

"My first visit when I get home must be to the tailor," he said to himself, with a smile. "These clothes are evidently getting worse for being new so soon," and he turned sideways and looked over his shoulder.

Perhaps he was a little vain of his appearance. Nor would it be surprising if he were so. Tall, well-proportioned, muscular, with a finely-shaped head, well-set; a wealth of dark brown hair, brushed carelessly away from a broad forehead, a straight nose, prominent chin, and well-cut mouth, dark, penetrating eyes, and on his upper lip the faintest prophecy of what riper years would bring—the entire *tout ensemble*, in fact, being such, that he might be pardoned for looking at himself more than once.

"She'll not know me, that's certain," he said, walking away to the other side of the room. "But I do wish she would come."

The next moment the door opened, and there entered, not Claire, but a tall, large, pleasant-faced lady of perhaps forty, though it would be hard to say with any degree of certainty what her age was.

"You have come seeking someone, I believe?" she questioned, with a pleasant smile, and in perfect English.

"I have called to see Claire Leicester," he said, blushing slightly.

"You know Miss Leicester, I presume?"

"I should do so, at any rate," he answered. "Her home and mine adjoin."

"Surely you are not her friend Eric," the lady said, archly.

"Eric Strome is my name," he said, feeling a little bit confused.

"Well, she will be pleased," and the lady smiled again and clasped her hands. "I will go at once and tell her you are here."

"No, please!" he said. "Do not say who I am, I want to give her a surprise."

"Do you know she often talks about you?"

"Does she?"

"Very often. I am English, of course. I am English mistress here; and out of school Miss Leicester and I are thrown a good deal together, or rather, perhaps, we seek each other's company."

"I am not surprised at that."

"No?"

"Not in the least."

She smiled again, and for a moment seemed as if about to reply, then turned quickly round and hurried away.

The next five minutes seemed an age. He tried to sit still, but found it impossible. Round and round the room he marched, with all the impatience of a prisoner waiting the verdict of the jury.

Would she never come! What possible reason could she have for keeping away so long? Then a light step sounded in the hall outside, the door was pushed quickly open, and

Claire—radiant and beautiful as a dream—stood before him.

"You wished to see me, I think," she said, advancing timidly towards him.

"I have called for that purpose," he said, in a husky, unnatural voice.

Then she stopped suddenly, and looked at him, while over her face swept, first a look of perplexity, then of incredulity, then of glad surprise.

"Why, it's Eric!" she said, her face lighting up as though a sudden burst of sunshine fell upon it.

"Yes, Claire," he answered, and their hands met in a firm clasp. And then, and then—let the truth be told—their lips met in a long pure kiss of brotherly and sisterly affection.

Claire was the first to speak. With a half-defiant look in her laughing eyes, she said, "I've a right to kiss you, Eric, for you are like a brother to me, and oh! I am so glad to see you."

"And I am so glad to see you, Claire, and glad to find you have not changed." And he pushed her from him a little while he held her hands. "And yet," he said, looking at her with earnest eyes, "you've grown to be a woman!"

"Oh, no," she said, laughing, "I feel quite a girl. Indeed, I don't feel a day older than when we used to sit together on Router Height."

"Does that seem a long time ago to you?" he asked.

"Sometimes it does," she answered, "and sometimes it seems only like yesterday. But now, Eric, sit down and tell me all about yourself. How comes it that you are here? I thought you were away down in Algiers with your uncle."

"We have been there," he said, "but are now home-ward bound."

"But which way have you come?"

So he gave her an outline of their journey, and finished by telling her that it was in consequence of their oversleeping themselves that he was there at all.

"Oh, what a lucky nap!" she said, laughing.

"But uncle is very mad," he answered.

"Oh, never mind that. You tell him when you get back

that I shall be very much disappointed if he does not call to see me; and tell him also that the Major will quite expect him to do so. That will fetch him if anything will."

Eric laughed. "You are as diplomatic as ever," he said; "you could always make him do things that nobody else could."

"That's because I humoured him," she answered, "what some folks won't condescend to do."

"That remark won't apply here," he said, laughing.

"Won't it? Well, you have altered."

"Have I?"

"Do you consider yourself a man yet?"

"Not quite."

"I'm glad of that."

"Why?"

"Because directly you consider yourself a man I shall drop you."

"You will?"

"Yes; I shall be stiff and proper."

"Which would be very improper."

"Why?"

"Because sisters should never be stiff with their brothers," he answered.

"Oh, indeed, that's a point that will have to be considered," she said, her eyes brim full of merriment.

"And in the meantime I must enjoy a brother's privilege to the full," and he leant over and kissed her again.

She did not protest or pout, she blushed just a little, and after awhile said—

"I really think, Eric, we shall have to give over being children."

Her manner had become quite grave, and for awhile silence fell between them. Had she, with quick womanly instinct, detected the truth? Was there something in his manner or tone that revealed his heart? Or had her own heart responded to that symbol of friendship in a way that she had not dreamed of before?

To Eric the symbol had become a revelation. The touch of her lips had unlocked the treasure-house of his heart, and all its store of love was henceforth hers. He had come into her presence a youth; her touch had made him a man. Henceforth life would have a new meaning and a

new aim; to become worthy of Claire would be his highest ambition.

"Do you know I saw you yesterday, Claire," he said, breaking the silence.

"No," she said, looking up eagerly.

"I shouted from the boat, and waved my hat, but you were too proud to notice me."

"What, last evening?"

"Yes."

"Then I did see you, but never guessed that the young giant could be you."

He laughed at her description, and then answered—

"Now, Claire, what is to be the day's programme? Can you get a day off, or am I to return to Cologne after this brief interview?"

"You'll not return till night?" she answered, laughing.

"Well, I'm not anxious to go back if you can spare the time."

"I'll go at once and make application, and get ready. I know I can get off. And, Eric, we'll cross the river, and climb the Drachenfels; it will seem like Rauter Height."

"Splendid!" he said. "But, meanwhile, I'll go in search of a restaurant; I have had no breakfast yet."

"Oh, what a shame!" she answered.

"I'll be back again by the time you are ready," he said, laughing; "so don't concern yourself."

She was waiting on the doorstep when he returned, looking, as Homer would have expressed it, lovelier than a flower. The promise of her girlhood had been more than fulfilled; she was swiftly developing into a beautiful woman. It was the supremest moment of Eric's life when he walked away by her side, down through the University grounds, in the brilliant May sunshine, and in sight of the great solemn river.

But who shall tell the story of that day? It was as though the pent back gladness of years was allowed to flow over it. Swift as a dream it sped, and yet more beautiful than any dream that poet ever described.

All too soon it came to an end. But Claire was not a bit depressed. "I shall see you again to-morrow," she said. "You must take this note to your uncle, and if it does not bring him to Bonn I'm a witch."

"You are that whether he comes or stays." And, raising her hand to his lips, he hurried away to catch the train.

It was quite dark when he reached Cologne; and he was beginning to feel a little bit troubled about the reception his uncle would give him. He had a feeling, too, that he had been a little inconsiderate and more than a little selfish in his pleasure. While he had been enjoying himself with Claire, his uncle had been alone in a strange city without a companion.

"I shall get a warm reception," he said, as he mounted the steps of the hotel—"perhaps warmer than I'm prepared for."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MEMORABLE DAY.

“Not beautiful in curve and line,
But something more and better,
The secret charm, eluding art,
Its spirit, not its letter;
An inborn grace that nothing lacked
Of culture or appliance,
The warmth of genial courtesy,
The calm of self-reliance.”

WHITTIER.

PHILIP HARDMAN was pacing his room in a very sulky humour. In fact, he had been in a sulky humour the whole of the day. It was a frequent little joke of his that he enjoyed being alone, because he liked good company, but, for some reason or other, his own company had not been particularly agreeable to-day. He was annoyed with himself for having missed his train, annoyed with Eric for leaving him as he had done, annoyed with the waiters, because they did not pay him more attention, and annoyed with the smells when he had gone into the streets. The only thing that had pleased him was the cathedral. Its magnificent proportions, its delicate tracery, its lofty open-work spires (only just completed), its embroidered buttresses, its richly-stained windows, all appealed to his artistic sense, and allayed, in some small measure, the ill-humour that dominated him.

And though he deemed it an awful waste for a community to spend so much time and money in commemorating, or in propagating, a superstition, yet he could not deny that the Church had well patronised the arts, and that but for Christianity—superstition as he deemed it—those wondrous pictures in stone would never have been wrought.

Still, nothing could entirely lift him out of the sulks

and, directly dinner was over, he retired to his bedroom, intending to get early to bed, so that he might be up betimes in the morning. He was still pacing his room, prior to undressing, when a knock came to the door; and, in response to the usual "Come in," a waiter entered with a letter on a tray.

"The young gent has got back, and has brought this letter," the waiter said, in his very best English.

"Very good, what is he doing now?"

"He is getting some supper."

"Hungry, as usual? Will you tell him I wish to see him when he has sufficiently satisfied his appetite?"

"I will, sir," and he backed out with a graceful bow, and closed the door.

"Written an apology, I expect," Hardman grunted, walking up to a table on which a couple of candles were burning, and throwing himself into an easy chair. "And quite time he did apologise. Hullo, though, what's this? A woman's handwriting, as I am a living man; scented, too, by Jove, and in the daintiest envelope. Here's a romance for an old bachelor," and he smiled grimly, while he tore open the envelope, and began to read.

For the next five minutes his face was a study. Its expression changed more rapidly than a chameleon changes its colour. When he had reached the end he commenced it again, and read it through a second time, then he lay back in his chair, closed his eyes, and laughed softly. The letter was as follows:—

"YOU DEAR OLD MR. PHILOSOPHER,—I am really surprised at you. I am, indeed. The very idea of your thinking of going back to England without visiting me. What will the Major say? And what shall I say? I, who have been such a friend to you, who never misplaced your books, or upset your fossils, or hid your glasses, or put pins in your chair, or any of the other rude things that girls usually do. Really, if you are going to treat me in this way after all my kindness, I shan't be friends with you; I shan't, indeed. But, of course, you don't mean it. You are only teasing me a bit, after your wont. I know you will be over to-morrow, and so I have arranged for another half-holiday, and I shall put on my best gown

in honour of your coming, and shall take you to see all the sights of Bonn (there are not many, unfortunately), so that you may have a good report to take back to Uncle Preston. I'm the same little girl who used to come so often to Priory Mere, only grown a bit bigger, that's all. I know you'll be delighted to see me, just as you used to be in the old days; and that I shall be delighted to see you goes without saying. I shall look my very best and smile my sweetest. So no more at present, as the school-girls say,—From yours very sincerely,

“CLAIRE LEICESTER.”

“Oh, confusion take the girl,” he chuckled. “She's just like her mother in some things; and, old simpleton that I am, I expect I'll have to yield to her. Of course, the Major will expect me to call and see her. I never thought of that; and really, now that I think about the matter, I shall be pleased to see the girl, for her own sake, and for her mother's sake. Ah, me, if her mother had been true to me——”

But he did not finish the sentence. A knock came to the door at that moment, and a second later Eric entered.

“So you have returned at last?” Hardman said, rising to his feet, with a frown.

“Yes, uncle. I am sorry to have left you all day, but I could not very well get back sooner.”

“Oh, no, of course not; no one was so idiotic as to suppose you could.”

“I know I ran away very unceremoniously this morning, but——”

“But you stayed away as long as possible to make up for it.”

“You see I missed the train that would have brought me back in time for dinner.”

“And so got the girl to write an apology for you?”

For a moment or two Eric remained silent, then, drawing himself up to his full height, he said, “Is this what you wished to see me for?”

“And if so, what then?”

“I will ask you to excuse me trespassing further on your time.”

Hardman quailed a little, and was silent. He felt, too,

that the lad had become a man. That he was no longer to be treated as a child, or mocked with impunity.

Eric was the first to break the silence. "I presume," he said, "we shall start by the first train to-morrow morning?"

"I hardly know," was the reply, in a much milder tone. "That is a matter I have been considering. It has occurred to me that the Major might not be altogether pleased if I did not call upon his niece; and, seeing we missed our train this morning, we shall scarcely lose any time by waiting here another day."

"Very good," Eric said. "I have no doubt it would gratify Major Preston if you ran out to Bonn."

"Yes, the same thought has occurred to me. So I think we will settle on that. I fancy, too, the girl herself will be pleased to see me."

"I am sure she will, uncle."

"She has said as much, has she?"

"She has, and repeated it again and again."

Hardman smiled; the assurance that Claire wanted to see him flattered his vanity.

"I hope we'll have a pleasant day together," he said, in his most agreeable tones, and then they parted for the night.

The next day was a memorable one in Hardman's history. Claire had invited her friend, Mary Vincent, the English mistress, to join them in their little picnic. Hardman was not overpleased at first, but he was soon mollified. Half an hour in Mary Vincent's company convinced him that she was no ordinary woman. Her fine, generous face was the index of a generous and noble nature. She had, too, that strange, magnetic power which draws out and calls into play all that is best in the characters of those she might happen to be with.

Hardman was fascinated, and yet knew not why or wherefore. There was nothing obtrusive in her manner or conversation. Her speech was never brilliant, her voice was low, though musical as silver bells. Somehow, in her company, he felt a better man; he had a feeling as though it would be impossible to be peevish or sulky when she was near. Yet they never talked about religion or discussed a single ethical principle for the day. Books they discussed,

and birds, fossils, flowers, and ferns. So the afternoon wore away in the most delightful fashion.

Eric and Claire were left to entertain themselves as they well knew how to do.

"Why, those elderly folk are quite enamoured of each other," Claire said, with a laugh, as she looked back, and saw them loitering far behind.

"I am surprised at uncle," Eric replied, "for I quite expected he would monopolise you to-day. And then, as a rule, he has quite a horror of strange ladies."

"One wouldn't think so from his manner this afternoon, at any rate."

"That is true. But you should have seen how he treated some elderly spinsters in Florence and Venice. It really was most laughable."

"Ah, but Mary Vincent is no designing spinster," Claire said, with enthusiasm. "She really is the most splendid woman I ever knew."

"I wonder she has to drudge as a school teacher," Eric replied, after a pause.

"So does every one else. It is one of those anomalies we sometimes stumble across that no one can explain. And yet she seems quite content; and, as for the girls, they all adore her."

"Why, Claire, how enthusiastic you are," he said, with a laugh.

"So would you be, Eric," she replied, "if you knew her as well as I do. But where are they, I wonder?"

"They have struck off into some other path, I expect," he said. "They evidently don't want us."

"In which case we shall be driven to the necessity of entertaining ourselves," was the laughing reply; and she locked her hands across his arms, as she used to do in the old days when they rambled together through Lindon Woods.

For awhile he did not speak. He was too blissfully happy to talk. To walk by Claire's side, to feel her hands upon his arm, to look now and then into her bright, happy face, and listen to the low, sweet music of her voice—that was all he wanted.

Before them was a long avenue of trees, on the floor of which the sunlight lay in yellow patches. Above their

heads the branches interlaced, forming a perfect canopy. On either side the forest stretched as far as eye could see, and all around them the summer air made dreamy music among the trembling leaves.

"It seems like old times, Eric," Claire said at length, tightening her fingers on his arm.

"It does, Claire," he said, in dreamy tones. "Would that such times would never pass away."

"If they pass to give place to something better, it is all right," she answered, cheerfully.

"What can be better than this?" he asked.

"Oh, many things. If we live right, life grows better all the while, and the best lies at the end."

"I am afraid that is not my philosophy," he answered, slowly.

"I know nothing about philosophy," she answered; "but faith and hope I have, and so the future can never be dark."

"And faith and hope I fear I have not," he said, after a pause. "And so——"

"And so you stumble and fear the dark," she interposed, quickly. "But you will grow out of that in time."

"How wise you talk," he said, laughingly.

"Do I? Then we'll drop the subject. You'll go to see uncle, of course, as soon as you get home."

"You may be sure of that."

"He misses you very much. Do you know, I believe he feels your being away much more than he has ever felt my absence? Poor uncle, he is not at all well, and he seems to get no better. Sometimes I think he has some great trouble that is eating out his heart; and then aunt, though she is very good to him, and all that, is not just company for him: I don't think she quite understands him."

"It is time you came home to live," he answered.

"Yes, I think that myself, sometimes," she said, with a far-away look in her eyes. "Well, well, only another six months, and I shall be 'home for good,' as the girls say."

"Will you be glad?"

"Yes, for some things, though I have been very happy here. Still it is getting time I took some share in the

world's work. When I was home at Christmas Mr. Quayle showed me how I might help in many ways."

"Mr. Quayle?" Eric asked, suddenly. "Who is he?"

"The Rev. Heber Quayle, the new curate," she said; "don't you know him?"

For a moment his lip curled scornfully. "No," he said, "I do not know him, nor do——" then he bit his lip and was silent.

"He is very nice," she went on, innocently. "I was thrown a good deal into his company at Christmas, and really he is very hard-working and zealous."

"Oh, no doubt," he replied, shortly. "Such people usually are."

"Oh, no, there I disagree with you," she said, quickly. "Uncle says Mr. Quayle is one in a thousand."

"Indeed! Will it take him long to finish his work at Lindon?"

"How innocent you are," she said, laughing up into his face. "A clergyman's work cannot be finished in a month or a year."

"Then he's likely to be a permanent institution?" he questioned.

"I think it is very likely," she said. "Mr. Lane is really past work, and if he resigns the living, which I expect he will, Mr. Quayle is almost certain to get it."

"Indeed!"

"I believe the living is in uncle's gift," she went on, "and besides Mr. Quayle stands well with his bishop."

"Oh!"

"Ay!"

Then they both burst out laughing, and after awhile their conversation drifted into another channel, much to Eric's satisfaction. He had made up his mind, on first hearing about the new curate, that he should dislike him. He resented his coming to Lindon at all, while his friendliness with Claire was intolerable. Homer's letters had made him uncomfortable enough, and now Claire's own words had only intensified the feeling. He resolved, however, he would not betray his feelings any more than he could possibly help, and so was only too thankful when the conversation drifted away to other subjects.

A little later they came upon Mr. Hardman and Miss

Vincent, seated upon a fallen tree, engaged in a most animated conversation.

"Oh! here you are at last," the latter said, looking up with a pleasant smile as the young people sauntered towards them.

"Rather here *you* are at last," Claire answered, her eyes brimming over with mirth.

"We gave up attempting your rapid pace," Hardman said, rising to his feet and smiling.

"All very fine," Claire laughed, "only it won't do. I consider I've been shamefully neglected."

"You?" they said in chorus.

"Yes. Mr. Hardman comes to see me, and then forsakes me at the very first opportunity."

"I did, Miss Claire, what I thought most agreeable," he said, with a bow.

"Oh, yes, it's all very well for you to try to get out of it in that way," she said. "But I am not going to accept such clumsy apologies."

"Ah," he said with mock gravity, "but you will relent, Miss Claire. When you see our sincerity you will relent."

And then Miss Vincent produced the sandwiches from her satchel, and for awhile conversation ceased.

So the sweet summer afternoon sped on, and all regretted when it came to an end. In the life of Claire and Miss Vincent it was a pleasant break, a grateful halt in the fag and grind of their daily life. To Eric it was a blissful dream, that he would have liked to have lasted for ever. To Hardman it was a change, as pleasant as unexpected. A grateful interlude in his unharmonious life, the memory of which would abide for many a long day to come.

Three days later they were on English soil again, and rapidly nearing Lindon Station. Eric was in a fever of impatience and excitement. All interest in the journey home had ceased after that afternoon in the woods at Bonn, and Hardman was as impatient to get home as Eric. The seven months they had been away seemed a long period to look back upon, and each was hungering for a sight of home.

Hardman, however, betrayed no feeling. It would have been unphilosophic to do so. But Eric was not troubled by any such consideration. He was impatient to get home,

and he showed his impatience in a dozen ways. At length the landscape began to grow familiar as the train sped on. Now the engine was slackening her pace. Eric dropped the window with a thud and pushed his head as far out as he could with safety.

"There's Homer," he shouted; "bless his honest old face. He hasn't seen me yet. Now he has; there goes his red pocket-handkerchief. Hurrah! Hurrah!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

• A PASTORAL VISIT.

“To do Thy will is more than praise,
As words are less than deeds;
And simple trust can find Thy ways
We miss with chart of creeds.
Our friend, our brother, and our Lord,
What may Thy service be?
Nor name, nor form, nor ritual word,
But simply following Thee.”

WHITTIER.

THE travellers had scarcely been at home twenty-four hours when they received a visit from the Rev. Heber Quayle. Hardman had just finished his lunch and had retired to the library for his afternoon's nap. Eric had gone into the garden to have a talk with Homer.

Sarah, on opening the door, stood for some moments in confusion, hardly knowing what reply to make. She knew her master hated to be disturbed during the early afternoon. Moreover, he had not recovered yet from the weariness consequent on his long journey, and besides all this he hated parsons of all descriptions, and would never see one if there was any possibility of avoiding the interview.

“I'm afraid master won't be able to see you this afternoon, sir,” Sarah said at length, dropping a curtsy. “But I'll go to his room and see.”

Mr. Quayle, however, was not a man to stand upon ceremony. He had come for a specific purpose, and he did not intend to be balked. From all he had been able to gather during his six months residence in Lindon, Mr. Hardman had been sadly neglected. Year after year he stayed away from church, and yet Mr. Lane admitted he never went to see him. This, Mr. Quayle considered a shocking neglect

of duty on the part of the rector, though he had sufficient grace not to say so.

The fact that Hardman was an avowed Agnostic, instead of being a reason for neglecting him, Mr. Quayle considered rather an additional reason for paying him more than ordinary attention. Indeed, the more the curate thought the matter over the more he yearned for the opportunity of bearding the recluse in his den, and showing him his whereabouts.

Being only a young man, his discretion had had scarcely time to develop itself yet, while his zeal was at boiling point. That he could completely demolish all Mr. Hardman's arguments he had no doubt, and as for the nephew, he thought he would be able to make a convert of him in a week.

Instead of waiting, therefore, for Sarah to return with her master's message, he followed close upon her heels. Curates, he argued, had rights and privileges that ordinary men did not possess. For a layman to do what he was doing would, of course, be a mark of ill-breeding; but he, being a priest, was not bound by the ordinary usages of society.

Moreover, here was an old sheep that had strayed away from the fold, and had got entangled in the thicket of scientific and philosophic doubt, and was in danger of perishing eternally. Hence in rescuing such an one, the shepherd could not afford to stand upon ceremony. He must be saved willy nilly, without question or apology.

In response to Sarah's timid knock, a low "Come in" was growled from within; and, opening the door, she entered; but before she had time to state her errand, or even open her lips, Mr. Quayle pushed past her, and introduced himself.

Hardman rose from his chair, white with anger. "What's the meaning of this, Sarah?" he demanded. The idea of a stranger pushing himself unbidden into his *sanctum sanctorum* was perfectly intolerable. Not a dozen people in the world had ever been into this room, and for this stranger to thrust himself upon his presence in this uncere-
monious way angered him almost beyond endurance.

"My good man, calm yourself," said the Curate, before Sarah had time to speak. "I can assure you——"

"I can assure you, you are not wanted here!" thundered Hardman, white with rage.

"My dear friend," said the Curate, smiling, "don't——"

"Let me say I am no 'dear friend' of yours, I never saw you before, and what is more, I never wish to see you again."

"I'm very sorry, I'm sure," was the complacent reply. "But let me say, as the servant of the Church, I'm bound——"

"You are not bound to be rude under any circumstances!" thundered Hardman.

"My dear sir, it is you who are rude. I fear you forget who I am."

"What does it matter to me who you are? I see by your dress, and if I were blind I could guess, by your impertinent effrontery, that you are some canting parson. And let me tell you, once for all, that parsons are not wanted at Priory Mere."

"I grieve to hear such sentiments," said Mr. Quayle, with imperturbable gravity. "But it only the more fully convinces me that I did my duty in coming to see you."

"Then you did not bring him here, Sarah?" he said, turning to his trembling housekeeper.

"No, indeed, sir," Sarah answered, with great readiness. "I told 'im I did not think you would see 'im; but he followed me, sir, to your room."

Philip Hardman grew suddenly calm. He began to feel that the ebullition of temper to which he had yielded was unseemly and unphilosophic, and that unless he pulled himself together, and held the curb rein with a firm hand, it would be woe betide his reputation. So, assuming his most serious manner, while Sarah quietly sidled out, he turned again to the Curate.

"And you consider this the conduct of a gentleman?" he said, in tones that were meant to be withering.

"I consider I have only done my duty," Mr. Quayle said, lightly, and he smiled in his most patronising manner.

"Your duty?" sneered Hardman.

"Yes, sir, my duty!"

"Your duty to whom, pray?"

"My duty to the Church, whose priest I am, and whose privileges I dispense."

"Which Church?" Hardman scornfully questioned, "there are so many of them."

"There is only one *Church*," said Mrs Quayle, with lofty condescension.

"Ah! you are but a young man," said Hardman, musingly, "so that will account for it."

"Account for what?"

"Your ignorance."

"Do you intend to insult me?" said Mr. Quayle, in sudden wrath.

"Oh dear no," said Hardman with provoking coolness, "pray be seated."

"I prefer to stand, thank you."

"As you will."

"You are in my parish, Mr. Hardman."

"Indeed!"

"Therefore I have come seeking you."

"For a subscription?"

"No, sir, it is not yours I seek, but you."

"Interesting. Will you take me in instalments, or in the lump?"

"This is mere trifling, Mr. Hardman."

"I am glad you think so."

"You are an unbeliever, I am told?"

"Oh dear no, you have been wrongly informed."

"I am glad to hear it, very glad; you have taken a great load off my mind."

"That is satisfactory."

"Then I presume you have not come to church in the past from some personal objection to the Rector."

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort. I consider Mr. Lane a most interesting old fossil."

"But you say you believe in the Church."

"Pardon me, I said no such thing."

"But you said you were not an unbeliever."

"That is so. I believe very strongly."

"I do not quite follow you."

"Then I will make my meaning clear. I believe your Church is an antiquated and a decaying superstition, and the sooner it is swept away the better."

Mr. Quayle dropped into a chair as though he had been shot. Hardman's admission was so much worse

than he had anticipated that it nearly took his breath away.

"My good sir," he exclaimed, as soon as he had recovered himself; "please withdraw those terrible words. I really cannot stay where our Holy Catholic Church is spoken of in such disgraceful terms."

"My dear sir," was the malicious answer, "no one wishes to detain you against your will."

"But really, sir, do change your belief," said the Curate, pleadingly.

"Could you change yours?" Hardman demanded.

"I could, if it were right and necessary to do so," said the Curate, after a pause.

Hardman laughed. "Yes," he answered, after a few seconds; "no doubt you could."

The Curate felt baffled, and looked distressed. Somehow the arguments he had intended to use had all slipped his memory: while his unbelieving parishioner had so adroitly fenced that he had been unable to get to close quarters with him.

"This will never do," he thought. "I am getting worsted; and if I do not make the best of this opportunity I shall never forgive myself." So, drawing himself up to his full height, he made a final plunge.

"Look here, Mr. Hardman," he said, "I should be traitor to myself and the Church if I did not warn you of your peril. Outside the Church there is no salvation. God has ordained that men should be saved by her offices and sacraments. If you refuse these you will be cast into outer darkness, where hope and mercy never come."

"Young man," said Hardman, cynically, "if I am any judge you are in outer darkness now. You seem to be ignorant of the very first principles of your own philosophy."

"How dare you, sir," said Mr. Quayle, in a sudden blaze of temper. "What do you know of the Christian religion?"

"I simply know what I have read in your Testament. I have looked at all 'ism's' as an outsider, and at 'Christianism' among the rest."

"Indeed."

"But you seem to have dropped Jesus Christ," Hard-

man went on, in his most cynical vein. "Not respectable enough, perhaps; too much of a democrat, eh? Well, he did choose queer company, and when He spoke He hit hard, especially at you very pious folk. I rather liked Him for that. It's many years since I read your New Testament, but I'll look it up again some of these days."

"You should take the teachings of the Church," said Mr. Quayle in alarm.

"Not at all," said Hardman, "I like to get things first hand if possible. And as well as I remember the Founder of your Church spoke with great plainness. But there, I'm forgetting. You've dropped the Founder. He wasn't respectable, according to your modern notions. Worked as a carpenter, if I remember, and associated with vulgar people."

"This is quite irrelevant," said Mr. Quayle, angrily. "I did not say that the Church had dropped its Founder."

"Oh, no, only implied it," went on Hardman, with unusual animation. "In your little exhortation to me you did not even mention His name. You seem to have substituted an abstract something, which you call the 'Church,' for the concrete Jesus. Of course, if you like the change it is not for me to complain."

"But the Church is not an 'abstract something,' as you term it," said Mr. Quayle, shifting uneasily in his chair. "It is much more than that."

"As you will," said Hardman. "But seeing you gentlemen of the cloth have so completely shifted your ground, I shall have to reconsider my arguments. Years ago we used to be told that Christ saved men, now it is the Church."

"The Church is His Almoner, if I may so speak," said Mr. Quayle, "and her sacraments the channels through which His salvation comes."

"Interesting, but somewhat complicated," observed Hardman; "and by no means in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ, if my memory serves me right. Still, it is no concern of mine. You may turn your New Testament inside out or upside down for all that I care. Only, excuse me, it hardly seems honest to so completely change your front and yet stick to the old name."

"Not honest! What do you mean?"

"Why, if Paul's philosophy was Christian, yours is something else, and you ought in common honesty to drop the name."

Mr. Quayle rose slowly to his feet, with knitted brows.

"Mr. Hardman," he said, "I grieve for you; you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity. But I will not argue further with you now, I will see you again."

Hardman went at once to the door and opened it, and without another word the curate walked out.

In the drive he came face to face with Homer and Eric.

"Good afternoon, Homer," he said, with quite a cheerful air. "And this, I presume, is Mr. Strome. Excuse me, Mr. Strome, but I don't think we need stand upon ceremony. I am the Rev. Heber Quayle, curate-in-charge of this parish. I have been to see your uncle, and have had a most interesting conversation with him, I hope you are well, Mr. Strome."

"I am quite well, thank you," Eric replied, stiffly, the Curate's patronising manner being anything but agreeable to him.

"I am naturally anxious," went on Mr. Quayle, looking at the retreating figure of Homer, "to get to know all my parishioners, especially the young men. You see I am but a young man myself."

Eric looked at him, but did not reply.

"And in your case, Mr. Strome, I may say my anxiety amounts to concern," he went on.

"Indeed," Eric said, shortly.

"You are between two fires, as it were," said Mr. Quayle.

"I was not aware of it," said Eric.

"That is very likely, and for that reason the greater your danger. Indeed, I consider you are in a most perilous position."

"Perhaps you would not mind explaining yourself," said Eric, coldly.

"That is what I am most anxious to do," said the Curate.

"On one side of you is the deadly sin of unbelief, on the other side the still more deadly sin of schism."

"You talk in riddles," said Eric.

"Then I will speak plainly. On one side there is your

uncle, who, I grieve to find, is a very free thinker indeed, and on the other side is that dangerous old pharisee and schismatic, your gardener."

"You mean Homer?"

"Yes; and I fear his wife is as bad as he. I think I have made an impression on Peggy; but the other two are hardened in their wickedness."

"You mean by wickedness, I presume, falsehood, theft, idleness, and kindred vices."

"Well, not exactly in the first instance. I mean the wickedness of schism, of disloyalty to the Church; and if people will be guilty of the greater wickedness, the lesser generally follows"

"And so you assume that because Homer does not attend your Church, or pin his faith to your creed, that, therefore, he is not to be trusted?"

"Do not speak of *my* Church, Mr. Strome. It is the Catholic Apostolic Church of which I speak."

"I accept your correction."

"That is right; and now I hope you will see that the man who deliberately perpetuates the sin of schism cannot be expected to have regard to niceties in other matters."

"Then you would have me keep my eye on Homer?"

"I would, indeed; and on his wife also."

For a moment Eric was silent. Then, lifting his eyes, and looking Mr. Quayle straight in the face, he said, "This is our first meeting, Mr. Quayle."

"That is so, Mr. Strome."

"Then, as far as I am concerned, I hope it may be the last."

Mr. Quayle fairly jumped.

"You look surprised," went on Eric. "But I consider you a very dangerous character. A man who, by inuendo and insinuation, would rob another man of his character, and that other man one of the most honest souls that ever breathed, is not——"

"Pray stop, Mr. Strome," interposed the Curate; "you altogether misunderstand me. I make no charge against Homer, beyond the fact that he is a schismatic. I fear already his influence upon you has not been good."

"Excuse me," said Eric, "I paid particular attention to what you said; and, furthermore, let me tell you that you

have no need to concern yourself about matters that are no concern of yours."

"But it does concern me," said Mr. Quayle. "You are in my parish. I am your clergyman now. I see your danger, and, however painful to me, I must warn you."

"But you need not throw stones at others."

"I have told Homer to his face what I think of him."

"He has not told you what he thinks of you, perhaps."

"Well, no!"

"For which you should feel grateful, Mr. Quayle. Good afternoon."

And before the astonished Curate could reply, Eric was gone.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CURATE PERPLEXED.

“Heaven pity you! So little turns
The stream of our lives from the right;
So like is the flame that burns
To the hearth that gives warmth and light.
So fine the impassable fence
Set for ever 'twixt right and wrong,
Between white lives of innocence
And dark lives too dreadful for song.”

LEWIS MORRIS.

MR. QUAYLE returned to the Rectory in a very uncomfortable frame of mind. He had told Mr. Lane what he proposed doing, and how he quite expected to make converts of both Mr. Hardman and his nephew, and the old Rector had chuckled good-humouredly to himself, and secretly wished that he could be at Priory Mere and witness the interview. He did not attempt to check his Curate's ardour or enthusiasm, or to advise him as to the best method of procedure.

“Discretion comes with experience,” was his reflection, “and Quayle will have to learn by experience, like other folks.”

So the Curate walked away that bright June afternoon with an easy confidence that anticipated nothing but victory, and returned two hours later with downcast eyes, and an expression upon his face that was not at all difficult to interpret.

“I've made an ass of myself,” he kept saying to himself all the way home. “A complete ass. I never advanced a single argument that was worth a rush; and everything I did say helped to set them against me. Why was I

such a fool, I wonder, as to allow myself to be drawn into saying a word against that old heretic, Homer? I might have known they would not have kept him and his wife all these years unless they believed in him. And that young cynic looked so innocent, too, and drew me on so easily, that I thought I had made sure of my man, and then he just rounds on me like that, and shows me what an idiot I had made of myself. Oh, dear! and I was so confident of victory, too."

The Rector, from the depths of his easy chair—from which he was unable to stir—saw his Curate pass in front of the window, with downcast eyes, and guessed the result of his interview. In fact, he was pretty well satisfied before he started what the end would be.

Mr. Quayle, however, went to his own room. He had lived at the Rectory ever since he came to Lindon. It was an arrangement that suited all parties. He had his own rooms, and when he was tired of his own company he could join the Rector and his family.

Mrs. Lane and the three girls were out on the afternoon in question, and so the Rector had been left to muse alone.

"He's too disconcerted to show up," he chuckled to himself, rubbing his hands gleefully at the same time. "And I don't wonder at it, either. Hardman is a wily old dog in some things; and if he's taken some of the conceit out of Quayle it will do him good. Zeal is all very good. It's natural in the young. But discretion comes with years. I was just as zealous and hot-headed when I was his age, thought I was going to convert the world right off, and was fool enough to think that if folks didn't pass through my small wicket-gate they'd never get to heaven at all. Oh, well. It's a mercy the Lord opens the eyes of our understanding a bit as we get on in life," and he chuckled again.

Then a knock came to the door, and the Curate entered, looking very sheepish and crestfallen.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said the Rector, looking up. "Well, how goes it with the recluse of Priory Mere—have you succeeded in converting him?"

"I fear not, I fear not," Mr. Quayle answered, in lugubrious tones. "He seems hardened in his sins, and would not listen to reason."

"Ah, that's serious," Mr. Lane answered, with a laugh; "but, of course, he received you like a gentleman."

"I can scarcely say even that," the Curate answered, dolefully. "The truth is, I made a mistake, a very great mistake; I followed the servant into his room, unbidden, and it made him very angry. Oh, dear, I was not quite prepared for it."

Mr. Lane burst out laughing.

"Oh, it was no laughing matter, I can assure you," Mr. Quayle went on. "It spoiled everything. Then he got cynical and flippant, and that was worse than his anger. All my arguments fled, somehow, and I was either speechless or talked commonplace. Then he actually assailed me on my own ground, and said I did not understand the religion I professed, and that, of course, made me angry, dreadfully angry. I grieve to say it, but I quite lost my temper; and then he poked fun at me. Oh, it was dreadfully humiliating. Well, then I left him, and met his nephew in the drive, a handsome, strapping young fellow; and I was ass enough to run amuck of him; and then he rounded upon me, and left me. Oh, I feel quite doubled up; there is no use denying. I've made a perfect ass of myself."

The Rector laughed till the tears ran down his face. He couldn't help it. All that Quayle's narrative lacked his imagination supplied, and the picture was so intensely comical that he could not keep a straight face, try as he would.

The Curate felt hurt. It was no laughing matter to him, but an affair of deep seriousness. "I see nothing to make merry over," he said, at length, in a tone of pique. "Here I have been trying to do good, and, as far as I can see, only harm has come out of it."

"Oh, don't be so downhearted about it," said the Rector, wiping his eyes. "Good will come of it in the end."

"I don't see in which way," said the Curate.

"Well, in the first place, it will be a lesson to you," said the Rector. "We can't learn too early in life that people must respect us before they will respect our arguments. Win a man's respect, and he will listen to you. Get a man's ill-will, and you may preach to him for ever,

and it will be of no avail. Your business now will be to try to win the confidence of these people,"

"Did you win their confidence?" the Curate asked, abruptly.

"Well, yes, I think so," said the Rector, with a sly twinkle in his eye. "I daresay Hardman regards me as a kind of fossil, but I believe he respects me all the same."

"But you never got him to church?"

"Well, no."

"And out of the Church he's lost," said the Curate.

"Ah, well," said the Rector, after a pause; "we think so when we are young, but as we get older we get more charity——"

"But, my dear sir," interposed the Curate.

"Yes, yes!" said the Rector, becoming suddenly grave. "As one sits in the shadow of the evening, waiting for the opening of the door, things look very different. I used to think that all doubters and dissenters would go to hell; but I don't think so now. God's love is broader than any of our creeds, and His Kingdom greater than any church or sect."

"But, really, my dear sir," said the Curate, "you must excuse me, but is this orthodox?"

"I am not much troubled about orthodoxy or heterodoxy," said the Rector. "He that doeth righteousness is righteous. Creeds won't count for much in the judgment, I reckon. It's the good man that will come out at the top, whatever his creed may be."

"But have you considered," said the Curate, aghast, "where such an argument will land you? According to your showing, a man may never belong to the Church, and yet get to heaven. A dissenter, for instance, or a free-thinker, or a Mohammedan, for that matter."

"Yes, I have considered all that," said Mr. Lane, "and I regard our Church as only one regiment in God's great army. The true Church is composed of the good and true of every sect and church and name."

"Excuse me, sir," said the Curate, rising suddenly to his feet. "I do not agree with you. I cannot. But I will not argue with you; you are my Rector, and so I will say

nothing." And before the Rector could reply he had left the room.

During the rest of the evening he sulked in his own room, and not even Lucy, who was the youngest, and the beauty of the family, could rouse him out of his despondency.

Meanwhile, Eric and Philip Hardman had been comparing notes of their separate interviews with the Curate, and both had come to the same conclusion.

"I don't like him," Eric said, with energy, "and I don't think I ever shall."

"Precisely my feeling," said Hardman. "And yet he's a good-looking young fellow."

"That may be," said Eric, "but he's dreadfully impertinent."

Hardman laughed, then added: "He's a Christian, you know."

"Then so much the worse for Christianity," said Eric. "I did intend going to church, to hear what these folks had to say for themselves, but this Mr. Quayle has settled me."

Hardman chuckled. The Curate had played into his hand nicely, and he thought he could not do better than let the leaven work.

"He'll not come again very soon, I guess," Hardman said, after a pause. A prediction which was verified by events. Many a long week passed away before Mr. Quayle ventured to show his face again at Priory Mere, and when he did call, Eric was out and Hardman refused to see him.

Occasionally Eric and the Curate met at Lindon Hall, but there was never any cordiality in their greeting, and if one had come to stay, the other was always in a hurry to go. Eric spent a great deal of time with the Major, and never seemed happier than when in his company. It was often a puzzle to him why this quiet, thoughtful man should have such a fascination for him, and it was equally unaccountable that the Major should take such a fancy to him.

The welcome home he got from the lord of Lindon was almost as hearty and unaffected as the reception he got from Homer and Sarah.

"I am delighted to see you, Eric," he said, and his eyes grew moist while he spoke, "more delighted than I can tell you. Now you must come often to see me, to make up

for lost time; every day if you can, for you will have a lot to tell me of all you have seen."

And Eric grasped his shrunken hand, and made the promise. He had a feeling that the Major was but too surely slipping away out of life. In the seven months he had been absent from home a great change had come over him. He was in every way more feeble and languid.

"Are you as well as you were?" Eric asked, looking up into his face with an anxious expression.

"Oh, I'm about the same, I think," was the quiet answer. "You know I'm getting older every day," and he smiled a sad, wistful smile.

"Well, we all are I expect," Eric answered, brightly.

"Ah, Eric, my boy, you are just reaching the perfection of your manhood. I'm not going to preach to you, only be careful, don't spoil it."

Eric laughed. "I'll try not to," he said, and then their conversation drifted away to other subjects.

So day after day, when Hardman stole away to his study for his afternoon's nap, Eric struck out for the Hall. The Major was generally on the look out for him, and his face would brighten directly the young man came into sight, and even Mrs. Preston—who was a plain, shy, sad-eyed woman, and who never seemed at home in her big house—would grow suddenly animated at the sound of his voice.

The Curate was piqued and amazed. He did not think it was right for the Major to make so much of a young man who was destitute of religious convictions and principles; and on one occasion he ventured a gentle hint to that effect; but he soon discovered he was treading on dangerous ground, and wisely forebore to pursue the subject.

Whatever might be the secret of this strange and unaccountable friendship, there was no denying its existence. Major Preston made no secret of his regard for Eric.

"He's a fine young fellow," he would say, "real heart of oak, and I like to have him near me."

So the Curate had to pocket his pique and submit—however reluctantly—to the inevitable. Yet it was noticeable that as time went on, his eagerness for the conversion of Eric gradually evaporated. He was still full of zeal for the prosperity of his Church; trotted round from morning

to night over the wide parish, visiting the members of his flock; spent hours in arguing with wavering dissenters, in the hope of inducing them to come into the true fold; and denounced, with wonderful energy, in the pulpit, all heresy and schism.

Yet the two most conspicuous heretics in his parish, after that first mistaken attempt, he left severely alone. True, on his second visit to Priory Mere, Mr. Hardman refused to see him; but Eric he frequently met, and might have seen oftener had he cared to do so. Yet he made no attempt to get into conversation with him on religious subjects, nor even invited him to come to church.

Of course there was a reason for this, perhaps several reasons. The Curate took no one into his confidence, but one evening, as he paced up and down his room, he argued with himself on this wise.

"The interests of the Church as a whole, are of more importance than the salvation of any individual member. Better one should die than that the whole nation should perish. Better Eric Strome should keep out of the Church than by coming in should keep out fifty others."

This argument seemed so logical and convincing that Mr. Quayle repeated it over and over again, until he had got it off by heart.

Then he began to apply it. "As soon as Mr. Lane dies," he said to himself, "I shall get the living; of that there is no reasonable doubt. But the church wants restoring. A new school is needed, and must be built, and dissent will have to be grappled with, and, if possible, destroyed. How is this to be done? I can see but one way. If I can marry Miss Leicester the thing is accomplished. On the death of the Major and his wife she will come into possession of all this property. I, as her husband, shall be lord of Lindon. The parish will be ours, we shall be able to do as we like. She is as zealous for the Church as I am. With wealth and influence we shall be able to work wonders."

"Well, now, how does this bear on Eric Strome? This way," and he brought the tips of his fingers together in front of him, and paced his room more slowly. "Strome is a formidable rival, or at least he would be if he were to come over to the Church. He is handsome; I suppose he will inherit

all his uncle's property. He is a great favourite of the Major; he is regarded with brotherly affection by Miss Leicester. All these are important considerations. But as a set-off against these things are his atheistical opinions. Miss Leicester will never marry an infidel; her heart is in the Church, and while he remains in his present mood I am safe.

"But," and his brow clouded. "If he were to give up his opinions and come over to us, I fear I should stand no chance. In which case it is not merely I who would suffer loss, but the Church. All the good work that might be accomplished would be stopped, and perhaps dissent would overrun the parish.

"Now," and he paused before a mirror and looked at his reflection, "I don't think I am selfish. I am not seeking my own happiness merely. Truly, it would make me happy to see the walls of this grand old church stripped of the plaster that now defaces it, and see a new school built at the other end of the village. But first I place the interests of the Church; my own happiness comes next.

"But here I am faced with the question, shall I not more truly serve the Church by letting Eric Strome alone, than by seeking his conversion? Moreover, he might make the Church a stepping-stone to her hand, and, when he had married her, withdraw himself and her.

"No, no! my duty is clear enough. The greater good will be wrought by keeping him in his present mood, until I have wooed Claire and won her. Then, when she is my bride, we will together seek his eternal good."

And with this pious reflection, he turned down the lights, and stole off to bed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PRETTY EVANGELIST.

“O what makes woman lovely? Virtue, faith,
And gentleness in suffering—an endurance
Through scorn or trial—these call beauty forth,
Give it the stamp celestial, and admit it
To sisterhood with angels.”

BRENT.

As the summer wore away Eric began to anticipate Claire's home-coming. Since the day they parted at Bonn she had rarely been absent from his thoughts, and with all the hopefulness and enthusiasm of youth he looked forward to a long period of unclouded happiness and delight. The two days he had spent with her had satisfied him that she was unchanged, save for the change that necessarily comes with years. Her beauty had ripened, her mind matured; but in heart she was the Claire of old—gentle, generous, true. So he looked forward to their meeting without a single doubt or misgiving, and even anticipated the time when he would be able to declare his love, and receive the assurance from her own sweet lips that his love was not in vain.

That he might have a possible rival in the person of the Rev. Heber Quayle did not greatly trouble him. Nor did he ever dream that any opinions he might hold could possibly be a barrier to their union.

Indeed, as far as opinions went in the matter of religion, he was not at all certain that he had any. He was reading nearly everything that came in his way that promised to enlarge his thought or clear his mental vision, but as yet he had settled upon nothing. His uncle had boasted that by the time he reached manhood he would know as much about Buddhism and Islamism as he did about Christianity, and, practically, the boast was realised. * It could

not be said that he was well educated. True, he had read widely and carefully. But though he knew a little about everything, he had not reached the happy position of knowing everything about something. There was no subject that he had made thoroughly his own, no system of philosophy he wholly endorsed, no form of religion that he accepted without demur.

His uncle's sweeping dictum that all religion was worthless he did not subscribe to. Indeed, he was inclined to think that in this matter Hardman said a great deal more than he meant. It seemed to him that all religions contained some measure of truth. In Buddhism, in the teachings of Confucius, in the pages of the Koran, he had found many things that were very beautiful and wise and inspiring.

In the matter of philosophy he occupied a very similar position. In the long line of philosophic thinkers he said of no one of them "This is my master." He had been interested in the empiricism of Locke, in the transcendentalism of Kant, and in the logic of Hegel. But no system of philosophy satisfied his heart's hunger or responded to the deepest longings and questions of his being.

As yet, however, he had been placed in no circumstances that required him to put anything to the test. His life had flowed on just like the river on whose banks he so often wandered, now in the shadow of the trees, now out in the sunshine, occasionally swollen and impetuous, but in the main with a calm and even flow.

At times he felt restless and dissatisfied. This state of incertitude in which he lived was not conducive to quietness and peace. He almost envied Homer and Sarah sometimes their simple faith, just as he had envied the Arabs whom he had seen going to prayer. All day long he was walking over a bog that shook and sank beneath his feet, and now and then a great longing stole into his heart for some moveless rock of truth, on which he could stand confident and secure.

But where was this rock to be found? What was truth? And then would come back to him the words of the quaint and kindhearted American, who lay looking with calm eyes at the approach of death.

Never would he forget that unanswerable argument.

Never would the simple, yet beautiful words escape his memory. "Then came the change; gentle as the dawn Christ spoke to me, and I woke. He touched my heart and healed me, and lo! I was a new creature."

If that statement was a fact, if the American was not mistaken, such testimony was worth all the guessings of science and philosophy a hundred times repeated.

But there was the rub. Was the American mistaken, not in the fact of the change but in the influences that had effected the transformation?

"I will read that little book of his some day," he would say to himself frequently. But the book was hidden away somewhere, and he did not know where to lay his hand upon it, and so the weeks sped on and the Gospel story was left unread.

Meanwhile, Miss Lucy Lane, who had become suddenly zealous since the Curate's advent, pounced down one day on Eric as he sat reading in the garden.

"Oh, what a delightfully shady corner you have here, Mr. Strome," she said, coming forward with a dainty book in her hand and a sweet smile on her pretty lips.

"Yes, it is very pleasant, is it not?" he said, rising quickly to his feet. "I often come out here to read when the weather is hot."

"And what may you be reading?" she asked, cooly.

"Well," he said, with a smile, "it is a history of philosophy, by Lewes."

"I guessed it would be some horrid book of that sort," she said, trying to look grave. "Why don't you read good books? Now, I want you to make me a promise."

"Oh, I'll be delighted, Miss Lucy," he said, gallantly. "You've only to command and I will obey."

"I'm not so sure of that," she said, blushing till her pink-and-white cheeks became crimson; "but if you'll promise to read this book"—holding out the dainty volume she held in her hand—"I'm sure it will do you good."

"Anything that will do me good I'm bound to read," he said, with a laugh. "What is the book about?"

"It is called 'The Meditations of the Weeping Sister of Bethlehem.' Oh, it is a real love of a book!"

"I've not the least doubt it is," he answered, taking

the book from her hand, and turning over the leaves. "Anyhow, the weeping sister's meditations are not long."

"Oh, no; but they are very choice. But never mind the 'meditations' now. Please sit down; I want to have a talk with you."

"Well, this is kind of you to take compassion on my loneliness," he said, looking down into her blushing face, and thinking how pretty she was, in spite of her red hair.

But here it should be stated that, according to the united testimony of the Lane family, Lucy's hair was not red. Her hair was auburn—at least, Mrs. Lane said so; so said Miss Lane and Miss Jane, so said the Rector, and so believed Lucy herself.

Now, as regards Lucy's own opinion, one might not attach much weight thereto, seeing there was just a possibility she might be prejudiced in the matter. But when both the Rector and his wife declared that Lucy's hair was auburn it seems to us the question is settled beyond all dispute, for if parents don't know the colour of a child's hair, who is likely to know?

Anyhow, Lucy's hair suited well her pink-and-white complexion, and as she had dimpled cheeks and a pretty mouth it was generally taken for granted that Lucy was the beauty of the family.

"Do you know," she said, after a long pause, "that I am very much concerned about you?"

"About me," he questioned, raising his eyebrows in well-feigned astonishment.

"Yes, about your soul, you know. You never come to church, or read good books, or anything. I think it's dreadful."

"Then you think I have a soul, Miss Lucy?" he questioned, in his most jocular manner.

"Oh, Mr. Strome, of course I do. How can you talk in such a manner. What do you think will become of you?"

"Now, Miss Lucy," he said, pretending to look grave, "I will own up. I confess you've beaten me. I haven't the remotest idea what will become of me. I wonder myself sometimes."

"And don't you think it's dreadful?"

"Well, I'm not so sure of that. One might become old

and ugly, and imbecile, so that, on the whole, I think I'd rather not know."

"Oh, but I was not thinking of that," she replied, quickly. "When you die, you know, what will become of you then?"

"Oh, they'll find room for me somewhere, I expect," he replied with a laugh. "I never trouble myself on that score."

"Oh dear, you *will* misunderstand me," she said, impatiently. "I did not refer to your body, but to your soul."

"Well, what about it?" he said, making a desperate effort to keep his face straight.

"Well, your soul is you."

"Yes, go on."

"And if you don't go to church, and take the sacrament, and all that, you will go to a terrible place; oh, I can't describe it; a place full of fire and brimstone, where you will burn in awful agony for ever and ever."

"Don't you believe it, Miss Lucy."

"Not believe it, Mr. Strome?" she said, opening her eyes wide with astonishment.

"No," he said. "At least, not if you can help it. Anyhow, I don't believe it."

"You don't? Oh dear, this is terrible," and she rose to her feet, with trembling lip. "I had hoped better things of you, Mr. Strome."

"I'm very sorry to have disappointed you, Miss Lucy," he said, laughingly, "but really, your religion is altogether beyond me."

She did not reply. She looked at him for a few moments with pity in her clear blue eyes, then shook hands with him and quietly walked away.

In truth, poor Lucy was too seriously troubled to pursue the conversation further, too troubled to keep the matter to herself, too troubled even to give a correct rendering of what passed between them; and so it came about that, without the least thought of harm, she talked to first one and then the other about Eric's spiritual condition; and when the story had once passed her lips she had no longer any control over it. In a few weeks Eric was the talk of the village, and with frequent telling the story grew. It was no longer a matter of hearsay. The Rector's daughter

had wrung the confession from his lips. He was first a doubter, then an infidel, then "an out-and-out" atheist, and then a blaspheming scoffer.

- Of course everybody said, "It was only what they expected; that with such training as he had received no other result seemed possible. Still, it was all very sad, and though personally he might not be to blame, he was nevertheless a dangerous character, and not a safe companion for the young."

Mr. Quayle heard the stories in their most exaggerated form, and felt considerably puzzled how to act or what to say. Claire would be coming home soon, and when she got home she would be certain to get about among the villagers, and so would hear all these reports. What then? If there was only a substratum of truth in them so much the better for him. And his interest in this matter was the interest of the Church. To keep Claire and Eric apart was not only a duty he owed himself, but an obligation he owed to the cause he had so much at heart.

So Mr. Quayle preserved a neutral attitude, believing that there was a soul of good in things evil, and that the loss of one man's reputation might in the end be a gain to society at large.

Eric, fortunately, heard little or nothing of what was said about him. He was still pursuing his studies, chiefly in Roman law, for his uncle had intimated that he should like him to qualify for the bar, and for himself he rather liked the idea. A hint had also been dropped once or twice about his having a tutor preparatory to going to Oxford or Cambridge, but nothing definite had been said, and he had not cared to ask any questions.

He had found time, however, to read "The Meditations of the Weeping Sister." It was perhaps the most unfortunate book that could have been placed in his hands at the time. Had it been a healthy, manly book, without cant or religiosity, it might have done him good, and led him to pursue the subject further. But when he laid down the "Meditations of the Weeping Sister" he had no appetite left for further pabulum of the kind.

It was one of the silliest of the thousands of silly books published in the *interests*, so called, of Christianity—a book full from cover to cover of flabby pietism and sickly senti-

mentality—a book with no more backbone in it than a jelly fish—weak and maudlin and false from beginning to end.

Eric laughed over it immoderately, as well he might, and when he had finished laid it down in disgust.

“If this is Christianity,” he said to himself, “it is a great deal worse than I had imagined it.”

So the well-meant ministrations of the Rector’s daughter led to mischief in all directions.

Still Lucy did not give him up entirely. Nearly every week she sent him a tract by post, and for the most part the tracts were as maudlin as the “Meditations.” Eric read them all, and found them, he said, inexpressibly funny.

So time wore on, and summer spent its golden days, and autumn shed its glory upon the lap of earth, and when the first breath of winter began to make itself felt Eric’s sun rose over Lindon and Priory Mere—Claire came home.

On the morning of the day on which she arrived he woke with a glad feeling in his heart, and the refrain of a song upon his lips. He fancied that he must have been singing in his sleep, for, like the echo of bells, the words kept ringing through the chambers of his brain :—

“ Claire is coming home to-day,
Home, home.
Claire is coming home to-day,
Coming home.”

It was a beautiful morning, with a touch of frost in the air, and a bracing wind from the north. So he put on his hat directly he got downstairs, and started for a brisk walk before breakfast. In the trees the blackbirds were whistling cheerfully in spite of the frosty air. What cunning things the birds are, for he caught the words in their shrill notes, distinct enough for anything :—

“ Claire is coming home to-day,
Coming home.”

When he returned to breakfast his cheeks were aglow with pleasure and excitement. Hardman had just got downstairs, and was busy with his letters.

“ Been for a walk ?” he said, looking up with a frown.

“ Yes,” he answered, “ the weather is beautiful, the air quite crisp and frosty.”

"I hate the frost," Hardman growled. "It attacks my nerves and teeth first thing, and maddens me with neuralgia. Last year by this time we were well out of it."

Eric did not reply, for at that moment Sarah appeared on the scene with their usual breakfast of bacon and eggs.

For a considerable while the meal proceeded in silence. Then Hardman looked up suddenly and said, "I am expecting Mr. Saville here next week."

"Mr. Saville?" Eric echoed in astonishment.

"Yes; Mr. Herbert Saville. You remember him, I think?"

"Oh, quite well."

"He is coming to stay."

"Indeed!"

"You will remember that he is an Oxford M.A. and a highly cultured man. So I have engaged him to prepare you for the university."

Eric was silent.

"You don't like him, I know," Hardman went on; "but you will get over that. I have been induced by several considerations to engage him. First and foremost, he is a scholar and a gentleman. Secondly, and scarcely less important in my eyes, is the fact that he has broken through all the trammels of dogma and superstition. The son of a clergyman, and educated for the Church, he has had the courage and honesty to discard the faith and folly of his fathers. There is no canting religiosity about Mr. Saville. He is a philosopher, a thinker, a free man. Thirdly, he is bringing out a great work, which I am helping him to see through the press, in return for which he prepares you for the University. So that on all sides the arrangement is a good one. I help him, he helps me, we both help you."

"I understand," said Eric, without raising his eyes.

"And I hope you will do your best to carry out my wishes," Hardman replied, and then silence fell between them again.

"I wish he had put off telling me until to-morrow," was Eric's thought. "This piece of news spoils everything."

He did not try to read that day. He spent all the morning rambling through the woods and by the riverside, and did his best to banish the thought of Saville's coming. Why the news should so depress him he could not imagine.

He was not superstitious, or given to sentiment, and yet he had a feeling all the while that Saville's coming meant trouble. He foresaw discord and disunion and strife. The fact that he was anti-Christian in his views was no recommendation in Eric's eyes, and though at present he was not very much in love himself with the Christian religion, or with such samples of it as had been brought under his notice, yet, on the other hand, he could not resist the conviction that the character of Christian people was quite on a par, if not a little bit higher, than the characters of those who affected to despise the Christian faith.

By noon, however, his depression had worn away, and he began to hum again the refrain of the morning :—

“ Claire is coming home to-day,
Coming home.”

At three o'clock he started off to the station to meet her. He meant to be the first to give her welcome home. Nor was he disappointed. It was his hand that opened the carriage door when the train stopped ; his hand that helped her to alight.

How beautiful she was. And when she looked up into his face and said, with a smile, “ How good of you to come, Eric,” his heart gave a great bound and every shadow fled away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"THE WORLD WENT VERY WELL THEN."

"And I will trust that he who heeds
The life that hides in mead and wold,
Who hangs yon alder's crimson beads,
And stains these mosses green and gold,
Will still, as He hath done, incline
His gracious care to me and mine.

Grant what we ask aright, from wrong debar,
And, as the earth grows dark, make brighter every star."

WHITTIER.

DURING the next six months the world went very well with Eric. He saw Claire nearly every day, and every time they met her welcome to him was as free from restraint as he could desire. For at least a week after her arrival the weather continued beautifully fine, and as Mr. Saville did not put in an appearance as soon as he was expected by about ten days, Eric had abundant leisure, which he enjoyed to the full. In the old paths by the riverside and through the plantation they wandered again, and talked of all that had happened in that long stretch of years since they were children together. There was only one thing that troubled Claire, and that was the state of her uncle's health.

"He has greatly changed, Eric," she said to him one sunny afternoon as they walked by the river side. "Perhaps you do not notice it, for you have seen him nearly every day of late, but to me the change is very marked. I think he feels it himself. And, do you know, I have a fear that he will not get better!"

"I had the same feeling myself on my return," Eric observed. "But it has in some measure passed away now. He seems no worse than he did three months ago."

"Oh, I hope he will recover!" she said, standing still,

and looking wistfully at the silently flowing river. "I don't know what I should do if uncle were to die. I should have no one to take care of me, for poor aunt is so helpless."

Eric did not reply for a moment. But he fancied he knew who would take care of her, and he drew himself up proudly by her side, and felt thankful that he had become a man.

"But I will wait till my twentieth birthday," was his thought, "and then I will tell her of my love, and I cannot think she will say me nay." And he turned his head and looked at the dainty figure by his side, and fancied she grew more beautiful every day.

"The Major may live many years yet," he said, at length. "And for your sake, and, indeed, for all our sakes, I hope he will."

"Oh, yes, I hope so," she said, turning away from the river, and continuing her walk. "He has been like a father to me, tender, forbearing, and full of love. I wonder at it sometimes, for I am scarcely related to him at all."

"He never thinks of that, I fancy," Eric observed.

"Oh, no; he calls me his little girl, and loves me just as much as if I were his very own. Oh, I do pray very earnestly every day that God will spare him to us for many years yet!"

He smiled a little bit superciliously, but did not reply; but the smile did not escape her, and she knew only too well what it meant.

"Ah, Eric," she said, after a pause, "I wish you thought differently on some things; but I have not given up hope yet. I pray for you also."

"Thank you, Claire," he said, with a smile. "That knowledge of itself will do me good."

"I am not going to argue with you," she said, after a pause. "I don't think arguments do much good; but you cannot hinder me praying for you——"

"Hinder you, Claire," he said, impulsively, "I would not hinder you for the world."

"And some day," she went on, "the light will come to you and then you will know."

"Light from any source I shall welcome," he said.

"And when it falls upon you do not close your eyes, Eric. Promise me that?"

"Claire," he said, "I will promise you anything that I can promise with honesty and truth. For God knows—if there be a God—that at present I grope in darkness, knowing nothing. I walk across a bog that shudders and sinks beneath me. I long for solid ground to stand upon, and for a certain light to guide me."

"And yet you never go to church," she said.

"I will go next Sunday," he answered, impulsively. "For your sake, Claire, I will go—aye, and for my own!"

"That is well said, Eric," she answered, with a smile. "I will tell Mr. Quayle; I am sure he will be pleased."

So it came about that, to the astonishment of nearly everyone, Eric was found in church on the following Sunday evening.

Mr. Quayle was prepared for him, and literally "went for him" to quote the sexton's words. The sermon was a vigorous piece of declamation on what the preacher called "the damning sin of unbelief." Eric listened amazed and almost confounded. The early part of the service had touched the better side of his nature. The singing was cheerful and inspiring, the prayers peace-giving and restful.

"I will come again," was his thought. "It will be at least a pleasant way to spend the Sunday and a break in the monotony of one's life; and some of those voices in the choir are really very sweet and tuneful, and, besides, Claire is here, and I can look upon her face."

But the sermon changed everything. Such a string of illogical propositions Eric fancied he had never listened to before. Faith was represented as something men could command at will; that it was independent of evidence, and most praiseworthy where most defiant of reason and common-sense. Honest convictions, if not in harmony with Church standards were represented as hideous sins, that God would punish with eternal torment. Hence, in the sight of God, heretics and unbelievers were worse than rogues and liars and harlots. The doubter, however pure his life might be, would be damned; while the scoundrel and libertine who conformed to the Church and partook of

her sacraments, would go to heaven. Interspersed were impassioned appeals to fear and selfishness. Religion was a case of every man for himself. To get the selfish soul into heaven was life's true end and aim. Honour, chivalry, truth, charity, received no word of commendation. Worldliness was condemned, but other worldliness was praised. The man who could swallow most of the Church dogmas was the biggest saint; but he who hesitated and doubted was a fit companion for devils.

At the conclusion of the service Eric accompanied Claire to Lindon Hall, but neither of them attended to the service. Claire felt instinctively that Mr. Quayle's sermon was ill-timed and inappropriate; and yet she hardly knew in what its unfitness lay. He appeared to back up every proposition with some passage of Scripture. He had advanced nothing but what she was accustomed to ever since she could remember. The sermon was a very model of orthodoxy; and yet the whole conception of Christianity, as presented that night, grated upon her feelings as nothing had ever done before.

Puzzled, pained, saddened, she walked by his side in silence. She had hoped great things from this evening, and now she felt that better Eric had not gone to church at all.

So time went on, and she felt that she had not the courage to invite him to go to church again; and yet she grieved to hear him spoken of as a sceptic and a scoffer. Grieved that a brave, strong life lacked the one thing that could round it into completeness; grieved that between them an invisible barrier was growing up which could have but one result, and that, to separate their lives utterly in the years to come.

In the meanwhile, Mr. Saville had arrived at Priory Mere, and had settled down very quietly to his work. Eric scarcely recognised him again, he had so greatly changed. His long hair had been cut quite short, while his face was adorned with a closely cropped beard and moustache.

"Why you look as if you had come out of gaol!" Eric said, laughingly, and repented the next moment his careless words.

Saville did not reply, but his hands and teeth clenched simultaneously, and from his dark eyes there shot a gleam

which Eric did not soon forget. Over dinner, however, he was exceedingly pleasant, though more subdued than when they first met him. Perhaps he felt his position as a dependant and resolved to act in conformity with his station.

In a very few days he had settled down to his work, devoting the mornings to Eric and the afternoons to his own literary enterprise. The arrangement suited Eric admirably. It left him with his afternoons practically free, and as the Major never seemed satisfied unless he saw him every day, most afternoons found him bending his steps in that direction.

He often thought, as he tramped familiarly from room to room in the big house, of that first visit now so many years ago, of his boyish diffidence and surprise, and of his fear lest it should all prove a dream. Now he was as much at home in Lindon Hall as in Priory Mere. Indeed, in some respects he was more so. In his heart he cared more for the Major than for his uncle. There was a bond of sympathy between them which he could not account for, but which was, nevertheless, very real and very sweet.

Mrs. Preston he saw very little of. She was a shy, retiring woman, who spent most of her time in her own rooms and manifested very little interest in anything of anybody. She had a fancy that she was a semi-invalid though she rarely complained. She did not seem unhappy, though it is questionable whether even her husband ever saw her laugh. She did not care for company, and, as a consequence, spent most of her time alone.

She was always kind to Eric, in a quiet, undemonstrative fashion, but ten minutes of his company was generally enough for her. So in his visits to the Hall he always sought out the Major; and now, since Claire's return, finding the one meant finding the other also.

These were blissful times to Eric. Every morning he worked with a will, for he knew that in the afternoon he would see Claire. Nor did he trouble now at leaving his uncle so much in the company of Herbert Saville. Hardman was more than satisfied. Saville praised his taste, complimented him on his knowledge of philosophic lore, encouraged him in his little conceits and vanities, helped him in the rearrangement of his fossils, and prescribed for

him when tortured with neuralgia. So as the days sped on Saville became indispensable to Hardman, while the distance between himself and Eric imperceptibly increased.

Eric had never studied his uncle's fads, never flattered his vanity, never pandered to his whims and oddities. Saville took the opposite course; hence, by contrast, Eric's conduct stood out in a very unfavourable light.

The end of this was not difficult to foresee, though, fortunately, for the peace of all, no one except, perhaps, Mr. Saville, ever attempted to look far into the future. Eric was so happy in the sunshine of Claire's smile that he looked at everything through rose-coloured spectacles. His uncle's indifference did not concern him; indeed, it is much to be questioned whether he even noticed it. While the doors of Lindon Hall were open to him, and the Major welcomed him with open arms, and Claire whiled away the long evenings with music and song, he did not trouble about anything else. So disposed was he to look at the bright side of everything that he even cultivated a friendly feeling towards Mr. Saville, and sometimes blamed himself for thinking hardly of the man in days gone by.

Certainly Saville spared no pains to make himself agreeable, while as a teacher he was patient and painstaking to a degree. Neither had Hardman overrated his abilities. It was clear that he was a well-educated man, with a capacity for imparting instruction rare even among University men.

His great work, however, on the "Rise and Decay of Religions," he complained, was far from finished yet; during the six months previous to his coming to Priory Mere he had gathered many new facts, which he had decided to embody in the text of his work, and which would consequently entail the re-writing of several chapters. He feared he would need the best part of another year to complete his great undertaking.

Hardman encouraged him all he could, and received his confidences with great delight. Saville's candour was charming. He told Hardman all his life's story, and drew a pathetic picture of the sacrifices he had made for truth and liberty.

To have the friendship of a man like this, Hardman felt was worth living for. Here was a man utterly free from

the cant of religion, untrammelled by superstition and dogma; unmoved by hope or fear. A man who was true for truth's sake, and upright from very love of uprightness. At last he had found a man he could trust, and he trusted him implicitly. One grand philosophic soul like Saville's was worth, in his estimation, a thousand canting Christians.

So the days glided peacefully away and grew into weeks, and the weeks into months, and there was no sign of any disturbing element either in Lindon or Priory Mere. Eric was eagerly anticipating his birthday, when he had resolved to confess his love to Claire, and it must be said that, with the cheerful optimism of youth, he had little or no mis-giving as to the result. Claire, herself, was too busy with works of charity in the parish, and in loving attendance upon the Major at home, to give herself up to any dream of love. She was only nineteen, and love and marriage, if she thought of them at all, were matters that seemed far away in the distance. Eric was her friend, the best and truest friend she ever had, save the Major and Mary Vincent, but anything more than a friend—well, no, if thought entered her head she put it aside.

Mr. Quayle was politic and observant, not so much in his own, as for the Church's sake. He had discovered the way to Claire's heart, and he pursued it with patient tact and diligence. In the village she was constantly hearing his praises sung. His zeal and diligence won her admiration, and his sympathy touched her heart.

Lucy Lane vied with Claire in her efforts to do good. But found her greatest pleasure not in her good works, but in the smile of Mr. Quayle. Poor Lucy. She had given her heart to the Curate unsolicited. Not that she was to blame, for though he had never spoken to her of love, he had paid her so many attentions; and she was so unused to the ways of the world, or, more correctly, to the ways of curates, that she thought in her sweet simplicity that those little attentions could mean only one thing.

It was well for Lucy, perhaps, as for many others, that she could not look into the future. These quiet, peaceful days were destined soon to end. Events were ripening rapidly, though no one saw the cloud on the horizon that was destined to overspread all the sky.

The first note of warning came one evening early in May, when the news spread like wildfire through the village of Lindon that the Major had been taken suddenly and dangerously ill. Eric heard nothing of it till next morning, for he had left the hall only about half-an-hour before the sudden, and, as it proved to be, the fatal seizure.

The Major had seemed in his usual health then, though scarcely in his usual spirits. The conversation had taken a very serious turn, as though he had a premonition of what was coming.

"Ah, Eric, my lad," he had said, "always do the right, always! One wrong deed may spoil the whole of life. We think sometimes we can make amends or atonement for wrongs done; but it cannot be: Nothing can undo what has been done; nothing can make amends. Ah, if one could live his life over again, how different:—But there, I will not pursue the subject further now. Some day, if I live, Eric, I may tell you a story—some day, but not yet—not yet."

"Oh, well," Eric said, cheerfully, "the story can wait."

"Yes, it can wait. Solomon says there's a time for everything, and the time will come for that."

And then they parted.

"God bless you, Eric!" the Major said, as he grasped the young man's hand. And, seeing him smile, he added, "Aye, God bless you!"

Half-an-hour later his servants carried him upstairs to his bed, and despatched a messenger post haste for the doctor.

About midnight most of the inmates of the Rectory were startled out of their first nap by the violent ringing of the door-bell. The exception was Mr. Quayle. He was still in his study, busy over his next Sunday's sermon.

Starting up from his chair, he rushed to the door and opened it.

"Robin Ray!" he said, in astonishment. "What brings you here at this time of night?"

"Master's ill—dying," Robin gasped; "and he wants to see you."

"Ill?—Dying?—Wants to see me?" Mr. Quayle questioned in astonishment.

"Yes, please; there's no time to lose," Robin said, eagerly.

Mr. Quayle rushed back into the hall, and seized his hat; then came out and slammed the door behind him.

"What's the matter," called a timid voice from an upstairs window.

"It's thought the Major is dying," the Curate called back, and the next moment he had vanished into the darkness.

A quarter of an hour later he was seated by the Major's bedside, listening to a story that made his ears tingle and drove all the blood from his lips. A story that was a confession of wrong and falsehood and treachery. A story that unsettled everything, and seemed to change the very complexion of his life.

He listened aghast and speechless while the dying man talked quietly on, and, when the story was ended, he stared around the dimly-lighted room, and half wondered whether he was awake or dreaming.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONFESSIONS.

"Sure, 'tis a serious thing to die, my soul !
What a strange feeling must it be when, near
Thy journey's end, thou hast the gulf in view !
That awful gulf, no mortal ere repass'd
To tell what's doing on the other side.
Nature runs back, and shudders at the sight,
And every life-string bleeds at thought of parting."

BLAIR.

For awhile there was silence in the room. The Curate bowed his head and seemed wrapped in painful thought ; the sick man closed his eyes, and, now and then, sighed wearily ; but, save for the ticking of a small clock on the mantelpiece, no other sound broke the oppressive stillness.

At length the Major turned uneasily, and drew a bunch of keys from underneath his pillow.

"What I do should be done quickly," he said, with an effort, "and time presses."

The Curate lifted his head, and looked at him.

"It is all the reparation I can make," the Major went on, with a sad smile. "I know it is giving you a great deal of trouble, but who else can I ask ? You are my clergyman—a man of God ; and I am sure you will see a dying man's wishes carried out."

The Curate bowed his head, but remained silent.

"Take these keys and open the safe yonder," the Major continued. "I have written in full all that I have told you. The document contains also my last will and testament. I wish now to sign it in your presence ; and if you will call Robin, you and he can witness my signature."

Then the Curate started. "Wait a moment," he said. "Let me be certain that I understand your story aright. You say that Eric Strome is your son ?"

"That is true."

"That his mother was your lawful wife?"

"Yes."

"That when Eric was a mere baby you heard that old Geoffrey Preston had made you his heir on condition that you took the name of Preston, and married Dorcas Gane; that you said nothing of this to your wife; that the lawyer had no suspicion you were already married; that for more than a year you resisted, and then the desire for wealth and ease overpowered you; that from New York, where you pretended to go on business, you got news sent to your wife, with plenty of evidence, that you were dead; that you then went to France, and married Dorcas Gane in a Roman Catholic Church, and for the next dozen years lived almost entirely abroad."

"Yes, that is true," the sick man answered, feebly.

"And so Mrs. Preston is not your wife?"

"Oh, yes, she is," the Major answered, quickly. "Directly I heard that my wife was dead, we came to London, and I persuaded her to go through the ceremony again in a Protestant Church. She was only too pleased to do so, for she has a great dislike of Catholics."

"Oh, I see," said the Curate, thoughtfully; "and yet I am puzzled to understand how you have managed to carry out this deception without being discovered."

"I am puzzled myself," said the sick man, wearily; "and for all these years I have lived in constant dread. But my wife had no friends at the time, save this brother recluse at Priory Mere, who took no interest in her, or in anything else outside his own affairs. The old lawyer, if he had any suspicions, kept them to himself, and he died soon after. Personally I was known only to a very narrow circle, and they forgot me, I suppose, directly it was rumoured I was dead."

"It is a strange story," said the Curate, with indignation in his tones; "a story of shameful cruelty and wrong."

"I know it. I know it," said the Major, rousing himself. "Don't spare me, Mr. Quayle. You cannot make me out worse than I am. I've been a monster, and I've paid a bitter penalty. I gained the world, and lost my life. I have had no peace since. My wife's sweet face and gentle eyes I have never been able to banish—they are before me

now. Oh, God! what would I not give to undo the past? My one comfort has been Eric; and all I have shall be his, save an annuity for Claire. But they will marry, for I think they love each other already, and then Claire will suffer no loss."

The Curate frowned, and bit his lip.

"And now, Mr. Quayle, get out the papers, and call Robin, for I feel as though my strength was failing me."

The Curate did not hesitate any longer, and, in a few minutes, the document was signed, and witnessed by Heber Quayle and Robin Ray.

"Now," said the Major, as soon as Robin had left the room, "keep those papers safely, and keep my secret inviolate until the death of my wife. Poor Dorcas, I would not like her to know how I deceived her. Let her believe to the last that she has always been my lawful wife. I do not think she will live long, and when she is gone, give these papers to Eric, and let him take possession. He will know then, and the world will know of my perfidy and shame. But, perhaps, God will forgive me. For this I pray constantly, and in this hope I die."

To this the Curate had no answer to make, and so he remained silent. His brain was in a whirl, his thoughts in such a tangle that he seemed certain of nothing.

At length he rose, as if to take his departure.

"Surely you will pray with me before you go?" said the Major, pleadingly.

"Yes, yes," the Curate answered, uneasily; and he pulled a prayer-book from his pocket, and dropped on his knees.

Did he pray? God alone knows. He read a prayer, but without heeding what he read, for his thoughts were busy with other things. Over the solemn periods he stumbled, and hesitated, and drew back, and stumbled on again. The dying man felt that the prayer was not for him. It did not express his needs. It breathed none of the longings that had been surging in his soul. It lacked all semblance of devotion; yet it did not fret him.

For himself, he felt too feeble to pray. He had gathered up all his strength for the ordeal through which he had passed, and now that his last will was signed, he felt that he had done his work on earth, and over his energies was

creeping a numbness that he thought must surely presage the end. But he had grown too weary to trouble or to feel any fear. He heard the Curate's long-drawn "Amen," as though it came from far away in the distance. He felt the grasp of his hand, and tried to say "good-night," but it was growing very dark, and sleep, sweet, beautiful sleep was stealing over him, and he was tired, very tired, and wanted to be at rest. Then to his fancy the bells of Lindon Church began to ring; so softly, so far away, and yet, oh, so wonderfully sweet. Soothing as a lullaby the music seemed to fall on his tired heart, and over his pallid and suffering face a smile of ineffable peace stole slowly, and lingered long. He felt a warm kiss upon his forehead; but he did not know it was Claire. A fancy had come to him that he was a child again, and that his mother was kissing him good-night. He tried to rouse himself to return the kiss, and he wanted to tell his mother of a painful dream he had had—how he had become a man, and had become rich through falsehood and wrong; but he was too tired now, and the dream was fading away. What did it matter. It was only a dream. He was only a child, tired with his play, and his mother was hushing him to sleep. So slumber stole over him, gently as darkness pales to the dawn, and deep as the waters of Lethe.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Heber Quayle had reached his home, and was walking up and down his study in a state of great agitation. He still held in his hand the papers he had brought from Lindon Hall: papers which seemed the death warrant of all his hopes. He had planned so much during the past few months, built so many pleasant castles, and now they were all falling about his ears. This terrible story to which he had listened, and which he had before him in black and white, duly signed and witnessed, had changed the entire aspect of his life. The hope of being the lord of Lindon, of building new schools; of restoring the church, and of crushing out dissent in the parish must now be given up; and, for the moment, it almost seemed to him as though life was not worth the living.

Then, other aspects of the case began to present themselves to him. He might not even become rector of Lindon. The living would be in the gift of Eric Strome on the

death of Mrs. Preston, and if Mr. Lane outlived her, his chances of coming into possession were practically *nil*.

"Eric Strome loves me about as much as a cat loves mustard," he said, walking excitedly up and down the room. "No, no; if he gets possession, I may pack my portmanteau at once."

Then another thought struck him which almost made him wince. "It is a most unrighteous anomaly," he said, flinging the papers on the table, and clenching his fists. "A most unrighteous thing. A freethinker—an atheist—to be the patron of a living! It is monstrous. It ought not to be allowed. It ought to be prevented."

Then he gave a quick gasp, as though he had been stabbed with sudden pain.

"You can prevent it," something seemed to say within him. "You alone know the secret. Are you bound to tell?—to deliver up the papers? You might destroy them if you liked. There is a fire in the grate, throw them on the flame, and what then? No one will be the wiser—or the poorer, for that matter. But you may be the richer."

Then he lifted his head and looked eagerly around him. "No, no!" he muttered, and he put out his hand in a deprecating attitude, as though he would banish the evil suggestion. But an evil thought that is given house-room, even for a second, is not so easily dislodged. Like a recurring decimal, it will turn up a thousand times in succession.

"Don't consider your own interests," said the cunning tempter, "consider the interests of the Church. Think of what will happen if Eric Strome comes into possession. Will he help to build schools, to restore the church, to advance the cause of religion? Nay, rather under his baneful shadow will not the church droop and languish?"

"Ah! that is more than likely," Mr. Quayle said with a groan.

"But if you were lord of Lindon," the tempter went on, "the wilderness would blossom as the rose. What then is your duty under such circumstances? Are you not bound as a priest to put the interests of your Church before the wishes of any man? Will you be true to your mission in allowing such an evil, when you can easily prevent it? Is

small wrong justifiable when you are certain a great good will come out of it?"

"No! no!" he said; throwing himself into his easy chair; "I may not do evil that good may come."

"But are you certain it would be an evil?" the tempter whispered in his ear. "In what would the evil consist? You shield a dead man's memory from reproach and shame; you prevent a great hubbub and scandal; you save Claire from a bitter disappointment, and you probably bring an untold blessing to the Church; while, as regards Eric Strome, never having had his hopes raised, he will suffer no loss."

So Mr. Quayle battled with himself as the night wore away, and, after a while, wiser and better thoughts took possession of him.

"The Major was not dead when I left," he said to himself. "He may get better, or, if not, Mrs. Preston may live another twenty years; and in the meanwhile Providence may remove Eric Strome out of the way. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' I will not trouble further about the matter until the time comes."

And he got up and unlocked his desk and put away the papers, and then stole softly up to bed.

On the following evening the bells of Lindon Church rang a muffled peal. The Major had gone to his rest. After his interview with the Curate he never spoke again. For many hours he seemed to be sweetly sleeping, and Claire and Mrs. Preston, who came often into the room, imagined that he was better, and that in the morning he would awake quite refreshed. But the doctor, who kept watch by his side, looked grave and held his peace. So the night wore away, and morning dawned, but the sleeper did not move or even open his eyes to greet the light, or smile a welcome to those who gathered round his bed. And the forenoon wore away, and still he slept, but scarcely seemed to breathe.

Then the doctor spoke out, and said he would never wake again. And so it proved. Just as the day began to wane he gave a long and weary sigh, and with that sigh his spirit went to God.

Four days later he was laid to rest in the old church-

yard, amid signs of general grief. All the village turned out "to see the last" of the kindly Major, and every one had a story to tell of his ready sympathy and generous help rendered in time of need.

Indeed, it was not guessed how uniformly kind he had been, nor how greatly he was beloved until he was dead. Then it was discovered that ever since he came to Lindon he had been helping, in quiet, unostentatious ways, the poor and needy of the parish.

"He wur never proud," they said one to another; "he comed into our cottage just t' same as ~~if~~ he wur one o' us. An' when t' missus were sick, nobody can tell how good he wur."

Eric heard these encomiums as he passed little groups of sad-eyed folk, and they touched his heart to tenderness, and brought the tears again and again to his eyes.

Of course, Philip Hardman went to the funeral, and so did Herbert Saville. Nor was the former unmoved as he listened for the first time for many years to the sublimely beautiful service for the dead.

The old Rector read the service by the grave seated in his Bath-chair; read it with choking voice and with the tears running down his cheeks. He felt that in all probability it was the last time his parishioners would ever listen to his voice—the last time he would ever perform a public service. He knew only too well that the sands of his life had nearly all run out, and that very soon he, too, would join the Major in the silent land.

Eric was nearly the last to leave the churchyard. He did not dream it was his own father he had seen consigned to the silent grave. And yet, had he known, his grief could scarcely have been more acute.

Outside the gate he paused for a few seconds, with his face towards Priory Mere. He was undecided whether to go home or to Lindon Hall. Then he started suddenly as a light footfall sounded behind him, and, turning quickly round, he found himself face to face with Claire.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ERIC GETS HIS ANSWER.

“Hearts that the world in vain have tried,
And sorrow but more closely tied,
That stood the storm when waves were rough,
Yet in a sunny hour fall off.
A something light as air—a look,
A word unkind or wrongly taken—
Oh, love that tempests never shook,
A breath, a touch like this hath shaken.
● And ruder words will soon rush in,
To spread the breach that words begin.”

THOMAS MOORE.

CLAIRE did not wait for Eric to speak. She saw the look of surprise upon his face. He had never seen her in black before. She felt strange herself, and knew that she looked doubly pale by contrast.

“Come with me, Eric,” she said. “I want to look into his grave. Oh, I wanted to come and sit in the church and listen to the beautiful service, but I could not leave aunt, she is quite prostrate, and I must hurry back again as quickly as possible.”

He did not speak, but he turned and walked quickly by her side, until they reached the grave. The gravedigger had not begun to fill it in yet; so the polished coffin lay exposed at the bottom of the deep pit.

“It was uncle’s wish,” Claire said, after a long pause, “that he should not be placed in a vault. ‘Let me have a grave,’ he has often said, ‘and let the soft and kindly earth lie close around me.’ Ah, but, Eric, he is not there.”

“Not there?” he questioned, looking at her with loving eyes.

“No, not there! His body is there. But he Eric, is better off. He has gone to God.”

"You seem very confident, Claire. I wish I had your faith. It seems a great comfort to you."

"Comfort, Eric, I could not live without it. It is my one solace in this dark night of trouble."

"I am sorry your solace is not more real and tangible," he said. "Still I suppose a poor staff is better than none at all."

"Oh, Eric," she said, looking at him sorrowfully. "How little you can know of such matters to talk in that way. My solace is as real as my life."

He smiled in his old, half-pleasant, half-supercilious way, but did not reply.

"Ah, Eric," she said, "you think I am being cheated by a superstition. But it is not so. And some day you will own how much you have been in the wrong."

"It may be so," he answered. "But I hardly think so. I have had glimpses of many religions, and so far as their dogmas go, they seem pretty much alike; you are asked to pocket your reason, shut the eyes of your common-sense, and believe, under penalty of eternal damnation, a bundle of illogical, and in some cases self-contradictory, propositions."

"Oh, no," she answered quickly, "there you do us an injustice."

"I can only judge by what I hear, and read, and see," he answered. "I have heard Mr. Quayle preach, and Miss Lucy explain. I have read the 'Meditations of the Weeping Sister,' and dozens of tracts, and recently I have nearly read through a volume of sermons that Saville hunted out for me."

"A volume of sermons?" she said, lifting her eyes in astonishment.

"A volume of sermons, Claire, preached by someone of the name of Edwards. A most entertaining book for unbelievers like myself. For those who believed it, it would be enough to give them the nightmare. For vivid and picturesque descriptions of the Christian's hell I don't think the book can be matched. Whilst, in some of the sermons, your God was made to appear such a monster of hate and cruelty that I thought there must be some mistake, and that the preacher was describing the devil."

"Oh, come, Eric," she said, in pained tones, "this is bordering on profanity; and by uncle's grave, too."

"I beg your pardon, Claire," he said, "I have no wish to pain you"; and for awhile silence fell between them. Then he left her side, and wandered away alone, and waited for her at the gate.

She was in no mood, however, for further conversation when she rejoined him, nor would she hear of his accompanying her to the Hall. With tearful eyes she bade him good afternoon, and walked away alone.

Half way down the village Mr. Quayle joined her, and walked with her to the Hall gates. He was in his pleasantest and most sympathetic mood—kind and unobtrusive.

She could not but feel the difference; and when she left him, and walked slowly along the gravelled drive to the great lonely house, she was compelled to think of the great barrier that existed between herself and Eric.

"In my trouble," she mused, "he has no word of comfort to speak. Even by uncle's grave he pains me with his conversation. Oh, if he were only like Mr. Quayle, how much pleasanter it would be for us all! Mr. Quayle cheers and comforts me; Eric depresses me."

Nor was Eric insensible to this fact. He felt that his conversation with Claire had been a mistake, and, for the first time, there came to him a suspicion that, after all, his opinions might prove a barrier in the course of his love.

Mr. Quayle had a shrewd suspicion how matters stood, and followed up his advantage. Claire had said enough to convince him that her conversation with Eric had given her pain. And, on the following Sunday, he preached a beautiful sermon on "The blessed dead"—a sermon which to Claire in her grief was like a draught of water to a fainting traveller.

The next Sunday Mr. Quayle preached another sermon, which made a great impression on Claire. He took for his text the words of Paul, "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial, or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?"

It was, on the whole, a clever sermon—in which he strained the principle of his text to its utmost limit, applying it first to commercial partnerships, then to philanthropic enterprises, then to social gatherings, and last, to domestic and conjugal relationships.

As good or ill fortune would have it, Eric was there, and heard the sermon. Claire had said to him during the week that it was neither fair to Mr. Quayle or his teaching to pass judgment from merely hearing one sermon. A contention that Eric had to admit was right and just, and so the Sunday found him a second time in the parish church. But, alas! the second sermon angered him more than the first. He felt that it was a mean and covert attempt to raise a barrier between himself and Claire. That the Curate was prostituting his position to unworthy and selfish ends, and making his sermon a vehicle of mischief to his neighbour.

He did not wait to walk home with Claire. He was so blinded with anger and jealousy that he felt he had better wait awhile, until he had recovered his normal state. So he stole quietly out of church during the singing of the last hymn, and plunged into the plantation at the back of Priory Mere.

“And this is Christianity, is it?” he said, with a curl of his lip. “I think now I have seen about enough of it.”

He did not allude to the matter, however, when next he went to Lindon Hall. Neither did Claire.

Both had an instinctive feeling that religion was a matter they had better not discuss. And yet it was impossible to resist the feeling that the very silence was creating a barrier that was growing bigger and bigger day by day.

So the days passed away and lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months, and glorious summer swept the landscape with perfect beauty, and made of every wood and meadow and hillside a picture of loveliness.

Eric, as was his custom, spent most of his afternoons out of doors, rambling where his fancy led him. But, in spite of the glorious weather and the beautiful scenery, he was anything but happy.

Over Priory Mere a cloud hung that nothing could dissipate. Between himself and his uncle the gulf was steadily widening. Hardman, always capricious in temper, was

growing daily more so, while it was evident to all who had eyes to see, that Saville was gaining more and more the upper hand. Hardman deferred to him in almost everything. Homer and Sarah obeyed his wishes, without daring to object, and felt, as they expressed it, "as though trouble was brewing," whilst Eric was conscious of an unspoken and an undefined something which filled the very atmosphere of the place, and depressed his spirits like the silence and darkness which prelude a thunderstorm.

Neither was he as happy at Lindon Hall as in the old days. The shadow of the Major's death still brooded over the place in spite of the summer's sunshine. Poor Mrs. Preston drooped and drooped from day to day. She did not know how much her husband was to her until he was taken away. She had never been demonstrative in her affection, nor had she shown any great desire to be in his company. But the very fact that he was in the house, that he was within call if she should need him, had been a comfort and stay to her. In fact, she had clung to him and leaned upon him for years without knowing it; and so, when she found herself alone, she sunk down into utter helplessness and despondency, and felt that life had nothing left that was worth living for.

Claire, ever generous, devoted herself entirely to her aunt, with the result that Eric saw less and less of her, and inwardly chafed in consequence. But Mr. Quayle rejoiced, for, as Mrs. Preston's pastor and spiritual adviser, he went to the Hall nearly every day, and generally found an opportunity for a quiet five minutes' talk with Claire.

So time went on, and Eric's birthday came and went, and still he found no opportunity of declaring his love.

At length, as Christmas drew near, he boldly marched off to the Hall one day, firmly resolving in his heart that he would not leave the place until he knew his fate. For months he had been waiting an opportunity that never came. "Now," he said to himself, "I will make my opportunity; for weal or woe I will have an answer."

The servant who opened the door showed him into the Major's study. A bright fire was burning in the polished grate, and a grateful sense of warmth pervaded the room, delightful, after the keen north wind that was raging outside.

"Will you tell Miss Leicester that I wish to see her particularly," he said to the girl, then threw himself into an easy chair before the fire, and waited.

She came at length, but with slower step than usual, and with an absence of that brightness and vivacity which generally characterised her.

Yet in Eric's eyes she never looked more beautiful, and, alas, she had never looked so unapproachable. Claire was no longer a girl. In the last few months she had developed into a strong, self-reliant woman. Eric felt instinctively that a change had come over her. Circumstances had compelled her to lean upon herself. The care of the household rested upon her shoulders. She could no longer lean upon others; others leaned upon her; and the result was, that all the latent energy of her nature had been called into play, and from a happy, light-hearted girl she had leaped suddenly into a calm, dignified woman.

"I am glad to see you, Eric," she said, advancing toward him with a smile; then noticing the anxious look upon his face, added, "I hope nothing serious has brought you here?"

"The girl told you I wished to see you particularly?" he questioned.

"Yes, and so I came as quickly as possible."

"Will you sit down, Claire," he said, after a pause. "My errand may occupy a little of your time. I hope your aunt can spare you for a little while?"

"Oh, yes; I think so," she answered, "though she is very nervous and depressed, and has a great horror of being left long alone."

"She seems to have kept you a prisoner of late," he said.

"Not kept me, exactly. I have been a prisoner from choice."

"I had begun to think we were never going to see you again. Priory Mere you have quite forsaken."

"I hope when spring comes again aunt will be better," was the somewhat evasive answer, and then silence fell between them for several seconds.

"I expect to go to Cambridge in the spring," he said at length, pulling hard at his moustache.

"Oh, that is right. I think it is quite time you went, and I am sure it will do you good in many ways."

"You will not be sorry for me to go away, then?"

"I shall miss you very much; but one can scarcely be sorry for what one believes will be for your good."

"I hope it may be for my good," he said, nervously. "But I don't know, I feel dreadfully unsettled, and for that reason I have come to see you to-day."

"If I can help you, Eric, in any way, you know I shall be delighted to do so," she said, kindly.

"You *can* help me, Claire," he said, impulsively. "Indeed, just at present no one can help me but you. Nay, don't speak, you must hear me out first. We are man and woman now, Claire; and the time has come when I should speak out plainly. You know that I love you; though you cannot possibly know how much. I have loved you from our first meeting, and my love has grown with years until it has filled my life. I believe it was your uncle's wish that I should love you, and that some day you should be my wife. He encouraged our friendship and seemed pleased at our growing intimacy. And now, Claire, before I go away, and to prevent any one else attempting to step in between us, will you not give me the promise that will make my work a delight and my life a song? I cannot think that you are indifferent to me. We have known each other so long and so intimately, we have trusted each other so fully, that surely you will not cast me off now and spoil all my life." And he reached out his hand, and took her hand in his and held it firmly.

She did not draw away her hand, nor did she speak for several seconds, but with her disengaged palm she gently stroked the hand that held hers.

"Say the word, darling," he said, eagerly, "that will make me the happiest man on earth."

"No, Eric," she said, still stroking his hand. "We are both too young to talk of marriage yet."

"I am not talking of marriage, Claire. I am willing to wait as long as you will. But we are not too young to talk of love."

"It means the same thing," she said. "And I think it will be better for us both not to allude to the matter again."

"Then you do not care for me?" he said, with a gasp.

"Yes, Eric, I care a great deal for you," she said, and her eyes grew dim while she spoke. "I care more for you than I shall ever care for any one else. I have thought, too, that this hour would come, when you would speak to me, and I have considered what answer I should make."

"And this is your answer?"

"Yes, Eric. As things are as they are, I think it is better we should try to forget each other."

"What things, Claire?" he said, getting hold of her other hand, and looking her straight in the eyes. "This is a matter of life and death to me, and let there be no equivocation."

"I have no desire but to speak out honestly," she said. "Perhaps this is a matter of as much moment to me as to you."

"Then why raise barriers?" he said, almost angrily.

"Nay, Eric, I have raised no barrier, but if they exist I cannot ignore them."

"You speak in riddles, Claire. Out with the truth and let me know if it is as I fear."

"What do you fear?" she asked.

"That you are dragging your hateful religion between us."

"Ah, Eric," she replied, sadly. "If my religion is so hateful to you, what hope can there be of a happy union? How can two walk together unless they be agreed?"

"We might agree to differ," he said, impatiently. "I would not ask you to change your opinions. Surely we may be allowed to think for ourselves without coming into conflict. Why should a matter of tweedle-dum or tweedle-dee be allowed to wreck our happiness and blight our lives? Has your religion no room in it for charity? Oh, Claire, think again. Is it religion to send me reckless and despairing into the world? And if I am in darkness and bondage as you think, is this the way to win me to light and liberty? Oh! my life, my love, let your own heart speak, let your nobler nature guide you in this."

For a moment she was silent, while the tear-drops gathered and fell from her eyes.

"Eric, it is because I care for you so much that I would not drag you into misery," she said at length. "We may



"You make me hate your religion more than ever," he said.

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love each other; but if we disagree on every other point there can be only misery for us both. You despise what I reverence, mock at what I hold sacred, treat my most cherished convictions as silly superstition. How could I kneel to pray while you stood near curling your lip in silent scorn? How go to church while you idled at home? A husband should be a counsellor, sympathiser, friend. No, Eric, it cannot be. Your opinions are as abhorrent to me as mine are to you. Our ways lie apart."

For a moment he drew away from her and clenched his fists in anger. "You make me hate your religion more than ever," he said.

"I am sorry, Eric," was the quiet reply, "but I cannot help it. My religion is not a mere matter of opinion, but of principle and duty and conscience."

"A strange duty and a strange conscience," he said, "that will lead a woman to win an honest man's love, and then crush his heart beneath her foot."

"Now, Eric, you are saying what you will regret," she said, reproachfully. But he was too angry to heed her.

"If I were a smooth-faced curate," he went on, "with an oily, insinuating tongue; prepared to play the hypocrite to gain my ends, and ready with a text to clench every argument, I should have received a different answer. Well, be it so; when you have driven me to destruction I dare say your peculiarly-constituted conscience will excuse you; and wherein you fail your canting Curate will supply the lack. Farewell, then. I have heard before of religion wrecking men's lives, but I never dreamed it would have wrecked mine."

And before she had time to reply, he was gone.

CHAPTER XXX.

TEMPTATION.

"And all through life I see a cross,
Where sons of God yield up their breath.
There is no gain except by loss,
There is no life except by death,
There is no vision but by faith,
No glory but by bearing shame,
No honour but by taking blame,
And that eternal passion saith,
Be emptied of glory and self and name."

W. C. SMITH.

"AND so the girl has rejected you!" It was Hardman who spoke.

Eric looked up from his plate with a start, and blushed painfully. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean what I said," Hardman answered grimly.

"You have proposed to the girl, and she has said no." •

"Who told you so?" Eric asked, with trembling lip.

"Never mind who told me so. It is a fact, isn't it?"

"If it is a fact, and you know it, why do you ask me?"

And Eric bent his eyes once more on his plate.

"Come, Eric," said Hardman, kindly, "you need not make a mystery of the affair. I am your guardian, and I think you might confide in me. Perhaps I may be able to help you."

"Help me? No, that is impossible."

"She prefers the Curate, does she?"

"I don't think so."

"Perhaps she prefers his creed!"

"Very likely; she hates mine."

"And has she rejected you in consequence?"

"I did not say so."

"Bah! what's the use of fencing. I have seen for years how things were drifting. The girl is fond of you, and you are fond of her; there are no two ways about that. And from every point of view the match would be a desirable one. Lindon Estates are not to be thought lightly of. But the girl is religious, or more correctly superstitious. She would wrong her conscience by marrying an agnostic. You cannot reason with such people, you must simply trim. Go to her in a week's time, and tell her that you have reconsidered the whole question, and that you accept her creed."

Eric dropped his knife and fork and literally gasped.

"You need not look so horrified," Hardman went on, with cool cynicism. "You have only one life to live, and why spoil it for the sake of a quibble or an equivocation?"

"But it would be false—wrong," gasped Eric.

"Right and wrong are relative terms," coolly pursued Hardman. "That which is best is right, that which means trouble and loss is wrong. Policy is a man's safe guide in a case like this. Saville says Philosophy knows nothing about conscience, and I agree with him."

"But surely honour stands for something," Eric said, with trembling lips.

"For something! Yes. But happiness, prosperity, contentment, stand for a great deal more. Is a life to be wrecked on the rock of mere sentiment?"

"I don't agree with you," said Eric, firmly. "Even death is better than dishonour."

"Bah! dying isn't so easy. Trim your sails to the wind, man, and live. Fortune, happiness, a beautiful wife, and a beautiful home are within your reach, and you fling them away and spend your life in misery because you refuse to practise a little bit of very useful equivocation."

"Uncle, you pain me," said Eric. "I never heard you talk after this fashion before. You must surely be joking."

"Joking? No, I was never more in earnest. I confess Saville has opened my eyes to a few things of late."

"I am sorry he ever came here."

"You needn't be. He is the truest philosopher and friend I have ever met. But listen, and I will tell you a

story. Claire's mother was every whit as beautiful as Claire when she was her age, and she was loved by a young man in every way worthy of her. I knew them both, and can speak with authority on the matter. She, like Claire, was superstitious. Her conscience had been educated to a point of sensitiveness that was simply painful. The young man could not swallow her creed. He was a scholar and a thinker, yet he might have won her, only a curate crossed her path and his. The young man would not equivocate. He prated of honour, and so lost his love—aye, and his life. She married the curate, and died at twenty-seven of a broken heart, so it is said. He lives lonely, joyless, his life one long regret. He has nothing to look back upon but pain and disappointment; nothing to look forward to but the grave. If there were another life when they might meet again, there might be some compensation; but since this life is all, what is the use of wrecking it on Quixotic notions of right and wrong? You have reached the parting of the ways. Take warning. I am getting an old man, and so look at life from a different standpoint. Principle and honour are high-sounding words, but expediency pays best. Unless you trim your sails, and put your high falutin notions into your pocket, she will marry the Curate, as her mother did before her, and both your lives will be spoiled."

"Then let them be," Eric answered, savagely. "If this is your philosophy, I don't admire it."

"You talk like a fool," said Hardman, with a scornful curl of his lip. "Is not what I say the logical outcome of my belief?"

"If so, then so much the worse for your belief."
 • Hardman stamped with his foot. "Look here, Eric," he said, taking off his glasses, and wiping them nervously. "I don't want to quarrel with you, on the contrary, I want to help you. I saw directly you came into the house what was up, and I am anxious that you should not fling away a fortune that is within your reach. Now look at the matter as a man of the world. You believe you have only one life to live?"

"Yes."

"Then is it not wisdom to make the best of it?"

"But would you have me perjure myself?"

"Don't use such high-sounding words, please. We all prevaricate more or less. Our social relationships would cease without it. You need not worry the girl about her opinions. In a year or two she will cease to trouble about yours. A little equivocation now and the thing is done."

"And what about my self-respect?"

"Self-respect? Do you think a man respects himself because he has played the fool and flung away a fortune?"

"A man cannot respect himself who stoops to falsehood and deceit."

"A man cannot respect himself who is an ass," said Hardman, savagely.

"I think, uncle, we had better end the conversation," Eric said, after a pause. "I cannot think you altogether mean what you say. I know you pride yourself on being a man of honour."

"I am a man of honour," he said, flushing nervously. "I would not wrong any one. What I have been suggesting to you is for the good and happiness of you both."

"Anyhow, I will think about it," Eric said, anxious to end the conversation, and he rose abruptly from the table and left the room; and a few minutes later, wrapped in his great coat, he was out in the nipping moonlit night, walking briskly in the direction of Lindon.

• He felt that he had a battle to fight and he wanted bracing for the struggle. The alternative placed before him was no trivial one. Everything seemed swinging in the balance. The hope of winning Claire he had cherished for years. It had been his inspiration and his song, and to give her up now was like death to him. "Should he act upon his uncle's suggestion?" The question forced itself upon him again and again, as he hurried along the frozen highway and through the sleepy village in the direction of Lindon Hall.

Unless he did something of the sort he saw clearly enough she was lost to him. She was the daughter of a clergyman; her whole life had been steeped in an atmosphere of religion; she would rather die than be disloyal to what she believed to be the truth.

But could he stoop to this deception? And if not, why not? He was accountable to no one. He did not believe

in any judgment-day. There was no one but himself to consider. Then why did he shrink from this deceit? Whence came this moral sense, this inward voice, this unseen hand that held him back?

Then another question assailed him. What had wrought the change in his uncle? He was not the man he used to be. There was a distinct deterioration in moral tone and fibre. That high sense of honour, of which he had prided himself in the years gone by, had to all appearance deserted him entirely. He had become a mere creature of policy.

And yet was not this the logical outcome of his creed? Could a man reach a high moral level and keep it who denied the existence of God, who scorned the idea of accountability, and who had no hope of any other life than this?

"Oh, dear," Eric said to himself as he slackened his pace a little; "I am sorely perplexed. Uncle's philosophy is very cheerless, and I'm afraid is demoralising also; but is Mr. Quayle's religion any better? Are men good or bad apart altogether from religion, or is there a power of which I am not yet conscious, that can shape the life anew? I wish I knew. I am in utter darkness, and darkness is always bondage." So he communed with himself until he reached the gates of Lindon Hall; then he stopped suddenly and drew back into the shadow of the hedge. Coming down the drive, his footsteps echoing sharply on the frosty way, was the figure of a man. A minute or two later the Curate flung back the gate with jaunty air, and marched away along the silent road, humming an old love song.

"Curse him," Eric muttered between his teeth, "I believe he is at the bottom of it; he has poisoned her mind against me, and is trying to win her himself," and he clenched his fists with savage energy.

A moment later, he emerged from the shadow and followed the Curate.

"I should like to checkmate him," he said to himself; "And why shouldn't I? All's fair in love and war. What an interesting convert I should make, and wouldn't Quayle be nonplussed if he had to receive me into the Church. Gad, it would be fine."

Then his face grew sober. "Nay, nay," he said, "I haven't got to ~~that~~ yet. I'll win her honourably, or not at all."

Meanwhile Claire was in a state of mind not easy to describe. In saying "No" to Eric she felt she had done a great and a heroic thing, and yet the pain of it was almost more than she could bear. She knew that she loved him, that he was the very idol of her heart, and yet an idol that she believed it was her duty to cast from her and trample under foot. Only the previous Sunday Mr. Quayle had preached from the text "If a man will be My disciple, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." And she saw then, as in a flash, what her duty was. It would have been heaven upon earth to have laid her head upon Eric's shoulder while he rained kisses upon her cheek. But it might not be. She must deny herself. This was her cross, her life-long penance. Her path to life lay through suffering and death, the death of all her earthly hopes and longings.

When Eric left her she went to her room, and kneeling by her bed gave way to a passion of tears. It seemed so hard that she should be called upon to sacrifice what she prized more than everything else on earth.

"Oh, my Lord," she cried, with clasped hands and uplifted face, "the cross is greater than I can bear."

Yet never for a moment did she doubt that she had done the right thing. Her religion was a creed to be believed, and a ritual to be observed. That and very little more.

And since Eric neither believed her creed nor observed her ritual, he was an infidel, his honourable life would count for nothing, and a believer could have no part with an infidel. For long enough she had put aside the truth and refused to look at it; but slowly, under the influence of Mr. Quayle's teaching, her eyes had been opened, and the martyr spirit had been aroused within her. It might be pleasant to go the way of fleshly desire, but that would mean disloyalty to her Lord. And so, like the Ephesian maiden when faced with the alternative, "Diana or Christ," she made her choice without faltering and without any thought of drawing back.

It is true she did long to die. And in agony and tears she prayed that the struggle might quickly end. She would have gone to the stake willingly; it was the living death, the life-long penance that appalled her.

Later in the evening, when the Curate called, she met him with such a beautiful light in her eyes that he fancied she had become a captive to his smiles, and was elated accordingly. He had never known her so sweet, so gentle, so gracious, and when he left, he felt that the battle was his already, and that after a little waiting he would be lord of London.

When he reached his rooms, however, other thoughts took possession of him. The first object on which his eyes rested was his desk, and locked in that desk were those fatal papers. He had never yet fully decided what course he would take respecting them. He thought he would wait the course of events. He was compelled to keep silence as long as Mrs. Preston lived, and before that time no one could tell what would happen. So he permitted the evil leaven to work within him, and was unconscious of the fact that all the while his moral sense was becoming more and more dulled and blunted.

To-night he took out the papers, and read them again, slowly and carefully, then he sat for a long time staring into the fire. The night was frosty, and the fire burned clear and bright. Down into that glowing hollow he might easily push the papers, and so settle the question for ever. Once destroyed, the memory of them would slowly fade from his mind, and this unrest which has harrassed him so long would give place to quiet and to peace.

If the Major refused to recognise his son while he lived, why should he bother about the matter now that the Major was dead? As likely as not he was not the Major's son at all. Men had been haunted by hallucinations again and again; and even admitting the story to be true, he could see no very strong moral reason for making it known. It would be truer charity to screen the Major's memory, and truer justice to let Claire have the estates than Eric. Then why should he hesitate any longer?

And he leaned towards the fire with the papers in his hand, then drew quickly back and pushed them into his

pocket, as a gentle knock fell on the door, followed a moment later by the entrance of Lucy Lane.

He would have been angry had the intruder been any one else, but he could not be angry with Lucy, she was so sweet and gentle and trusting. He knew that he had won her heart, and that, apart from questions of policy and self-interest, he cared more for her than for any one else in the world. In fact, he intended to marry Lucy if he failed to win Claire Leicester.

"Well, little girl," he said, with an uneasy feeling in his heart. "What is your pleasure?"

"Mother wishes to know if you will come and have supper with us to-night?" and she looked up diffidently as she spoke.

"Come and talk with me a little while first," he said, and he took her hand and led her to a chair.

When she was seated, he locked the offending papers in his desk, once more, then came and seated himself by her side.

"You have grown a little shy of me lately," he said, softly, laying his hand upon hers.

"I am sure I have no wish to be," she answered, timidly, with downcast eyes.

Then he stole his arm around her. "I hope we shall always be friends, Lucy," he said, as he did so.

She blushed and trembled, and answered, "I hope so, Mr. Quayle."

"You are a dear little girl," he whispered, "and I want to be your big brother for the present."

"My big brother?" she questioned, while her lips trembled just a little.

"For the present, you know. Some day, perhaps——," then he grew silent, and brought his face nearer to hers, so near, indeed, that she could feel his hot breath upon her cheek.

She drew herself away a little, flushed and trembling.

"Perhaps we had better go to supper now," he said, "or they will wonder what has kept you. Some day we will have more time for a quiet chat."

"Oh, Mr. Quayle, I do not quite understand you," she said, growing very red, then very pale. "I--I--"

"Never mind, now, little girl," he said, taking her hand in his and pressing it. "You will understand me some day."

She looked at him eagerly, sadly, for a moment or two, then slowly walked toward the door.

"I know I am an awful coward, perhaps something worse," he said to himself, as he followed her, "but the temptation is very strong."

CHAPTER XXXI.

DETERIORATION.

“ Learn to win a lady’s faith
Nobly, as the thing is high ;
Bravely—as for life and death—
With a loyal gaiety.

Lead her from the festive boards,
Point her to the starry skies,
Guard her by your faithful words,
Pure from courtship’s flatteries.”

E. B. BROWNING.

ON Christmas Eve Eric went to see Claire again. “ I have come to ask your pardon,” he said, “ for the unkind words I spoke the other day.”

“ I knew you would be sorry, Eric,” she answered, taking his proffered hand and smiling at him in her old winsome manner.

“ Then you will forgive me ?” he asked.

“ Freely, Eric ; and yet I have nothing to forgive. I provoked you into speaking as you did.”

“ I could not part with you in anger,” he answered, making an effort to keep his voice steady. “ You have been the dream of my life. Oh, Claire, you can never know how much you are to me, nor how dark the world will be without your love !”

“ I shall always love you, Eric,” she answered impulsively.

“ And yet you refuse me ? Oh, Claire, my darling, think better of it !”

“ No, no, Eric,” she said, drawing away her hand from his ; “ do not tempt me ; do not make my cross heavier than it is already.”

"But why should we be doomed to walk apart?" he pleaded. "Surely Nature intended us for each other"

"How can two walk together unless they be agreed?" she asked, quickly.

"But we are agreed," he said.

"Then you have changed your opinions?" she asked.

He coloured slightly, and bit his lip. Now was his chance. One little falsehood and the prize might be his. She would believe him, whatever he said. Surely if a falsehood were ever justifiable it was in this case. His hesitation, however, was only for a moment.

"I cannot change my opinions at will," he said. "But surely, Claire, we may hold different opinions, and yet be one in life. Is not honourable conduct more important than orthodox opinions?"

"Ah, Eric," she said, sadly, "you do not understand."

"If Christianity means martyrdom, I do not want to understand," he said, hastily.

"We will not argue, Eric. It could only pain us both. I had hoped—but never mind. We must go our different ways. It is God's will." She was very pale, and her lips trembled a little, but in her large eyes there was a steady resolute light, that spoke of a battle fought and a victory won.

"If I had any comfort or sympathy in my home, I could bear it better," he answered, after a pause. "But I have nothing. I am alone; desolate, friendless, with none to love me or care for me on the wide earth."

Her eyes drooped while he spoke. But to his wail she had no answer to make. She could not tell him that God loved him. Her creed would not allow her to say that. He was an infidel—the enemy of God; and had not Mr. Quayle preached more than once that God hated such people with a perfect hatred?

"And you have no word of encouragement to give?" he asked after a long pause.

"Oh, Eric, if you would become a Christian——" she began. But he turned away with an impatient gesture.

"Can you wonder that I have no wish to be one?" he said.

She held out her hand. "Good-bye, Eric," she said, "I must be going now. Aunt will be wondering what has become of me. She is so helpless, and daily grows weaker."

He did not speak. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, then quickly turned on his heel and walked away.

After that he went no more to Lindon Hall. He knew now that Claire was not to be moved. And, with a courage that did him credit, he hid his pain and disappointment deep in his heart, and settled quietly down to his work.

In fact, his books were his only solace now. The weather was too winterly to let him venture much out of doors, nor had he any acquaintances to draw him away from Priory Mere. Young people, his own age, out of deference to their parents' wishes, had shunned him because of his opinions. Orthodox mammas were horrified at the thought of their sons making a companion of Eric Strome, and righteously refused to invite him to their parties.

So he had lived alone, self-centred and defiant. He knew he was shunned, he knew the reason why, but he made no complaint.

Since Saville came to Priory Mere he had converted one of the upstairs rooms into a study for himself, and here he spent most of his time; evidently much to the relief of both Hardman and Saville. Sometimes Homer stole up from the kitchen and spent an hour with him, and the company of the genial old Christian was always welcome.

But of late a good deal of the cheerfulness had gone out of Homer's manner.

"Priory Mere ain't like it used to be," he said to Eric one evening.

"Why, what has gone wrong with the place, Homer?"

"It ain't the place exactly, Master Eric, as much as the people that's in it. Master Hardman is a changed man."

"Got converted, eh?"

The old man smiled, sadly. "Converted backward," he said. "His little bit o' deceits that I used to smile over have grown into mighty big ones. Ah, Master Eric, it's a sad thing when a man has no religion."

"Why, Homer, why?"

"Because you see, he's no sense of accountability. He acknowledges no authority above that of man. He's nothin' to live for but what is in this life. He's nothin' to hold him to truth an' honour but self-interest. He's all afloat as it were, without compass or rudder. Oh, it must be a mighty sad state to be in."

"You think so, Homer?"

"No, I don't think so; I'm sure on it. No wonder Priory Mere is sich a gloomy old sepulchre when God is shut out of it; and it's grown gloomier since Mr. Saville came here. I don't like that man, Master Eric, notwithstanding he's so civil and smooth-tongued that you'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Oh no, he's up to no good! I know he's got a sight of money out of the master already."

Eric started. "How do you know that?" he asked.

"Oh, I've overheard 'em talkin' lots of times, an' so has Sarah. Not that either on us wanted to listen, for God knows we've tried to be faithful servants an' not meddle in what didn't concern us; but we couldn't help hearin'."

"Well, what have you heard?"

"Oh, the first I heard was a long time ago. I was busy weedin' in the garden, an' they were walkin' up and down the path. They must have known I were there, but they didn't notice. They were a-talkin' about his book, and how the master's name was to appear as one o' the authors. An' he seemed mighty proud at the idea."

"I'll let you have £500 as a first instalment next week," I heard him say. And then Saville said somethin' about it makin' the fortunes of both of them. An' my opinion is he's had several instalments since then."

Eric bit his lip. "Why did you not tell me of this before?" he asked at length.

"I had thought of doing it many times, but I didn't want to worry you. I don't see as how you can do anythin'."

"No! Unfortunately that is true."

"Saville has a terrible hold on 'im, some how; an' the master seems to have no power to resist him. Do you know anything about opium, Master Eric?"

"About opium? No. Why?"

"Well, I don't know, but I fear the master is taking it. Saville recommended him something for his neuralgia, an' I believe it was that. I know he takes something which kills the pain, and sends him into sich a dreamy state that he don't care for nothin'."

"That is so," said Eric. "I've often wondered what had come over him."

"He's losing himself body and soul," Homer went on, "an' it makes me terrible sad." And rising to his feet in a state of great agitation, the old man hurriedly left the room.

For the next two months Eric kept watch over his uncle as he had never done before, with the result that he became convinced that Homer was right in every particular.

Then the matter was partially driven from his mind by other events. Mrs. Preston, who had drooped so long, peacefully and painlessly slipped out of time into eternity. No one was greatly surprised at the tidings, but very soon some interesting details leaked out in connection therewith.

Before the day was out the news had travelled from end to end of Lindon, and had even found its way to Priory Mere, that, before her death, Mrs. Preston had expressed a very earnest hope that Mr. Quayle would marry Claire.

A few hours later this was considerably amplified. Not only had she expressed this hope, it was said, but having first ascertained what were the Curate's feelings, she had wrung a promise from Claire that she would marry him within a year of her death.

This story was told with so much circumstance and detail, while there seemed no earthly reason why it should not be true, that everywhere it was accepted as literal fact.

"I know'd she'd never marry young Strome," people said to each other knowingly. "He may be very handsome an' clever; but he's none o' her way o' thinkin'; an' she ain't the sort to go ag'in her conscience."

So it was settled, as far as gossip could settle anything, that the Rev. Heber Quayle would be the next lord of Lindon; and, on the whole, the villagers were fairly well pleased. He was young, good-looking, and clever, while he had already proved himself a real friend and helper to many a poor cottager in time of sickness and trouble. The people who did not rejoice in the prospect were the Dissenters. He had shown them so much antipathy, and had striven so hard for their annihilation, that they feared when he got to be lord of Lindon they might have a difficulty in maintaining an existence at all.

For several days little else was talked about in Lindon, and the *pros* and *cons* were discussed in every cottage and

public-house in the parish. When Lucy Lane first heard the news she fell into a dead faint, and remained unconscious for several hours. Eric listened to the gossip in silence, and without moving a muscle; then walked quietly to his room and bolted the door, and for the best part of the night fought a desperate battle with the devils of jealousy and hate.

It was hard enough to lose Claire, but to see her in one short year the wife of another was a prospect more bitter than death. He did not venture into Lindon the next day; he was afraid he might meet the Curate, and he had no wish to see him just yet.

In this respect their feelings were mutual. Mr. Quayle did not venture out of the house for the day. He had a perfect horror of meeting Eric. He felt as though he would never be able to look into his eyes again, for he knew in his heart that he meant to wrong him and rob him. He tried to persuade himself that he had not yet decided what he should do, that he should wait till after the funeral. But he was not so dense as not to know and feel that when a man dallies with sin and temptation for nearly twelve months he is almost certain to yield in the end.

In his better moments he frequently said to himself, "I ought to have strangled the thought in its birth; crushed out the evil suggestion at the very beginning. Then I should have been a free man. Now it has become a giant, and will strangle me."

Yet, notwithstanding these momentary revelations of a higher duty, he never made any real attempt to battle with and overcome the temptation. On the contrary, he expended all his ingenuity in trying to find justification for the act he contemplated. Apart from all casuistry, he knew that he contemplated a terrible wrong, a wrong so terrible, indeed, that when the first suggestion came to him it made him shudder. But months of dallying with the foul thing had made him familiar with its face, until now the sin was no longer the repulsive thing it seemed at first.

It was some satisfaction to him, when news came of Mrs. Preston's death, that the papers were still in his possession. He had been on the point of destroying them again and again, but something had always stayed his hand. Had he done so, he would have been like Esau, without room

for repentance, however carefully and tearfully he might have sought it.

"Thank God," he muttered with a sigh, "I can still retreat if I wish to. As yet I have done no wrong to anyone. I have only debated what is best in the interests of all concerned."

And yet all the while he knew that he had no earnest desire to retreat. Never once did he say firmly, and resolutely, "By God's help I will do the right, whatever the consequences." On the contrary, he was ever on the lookout for a way by which he might do the deed, and yet justify himself in his own eyes.

The prospect of being lord of Lindon, of having the affairs of the parish entirely in his own hands, of being able to restore the church, build schools, and stamp out Dissent was such a captivating one, that it weighed down all minor considerations, and made him heedless of the voice of conscience and deaf to the whisperings of the Spirit. •

On the night following the death of Mrs. Preston he did experience a brief clearing of his mental and spiritual vision. For a brief space he saw himself as he really was; saw the heinousness of the offence which he contemplated; saw himself a traitor to his trust, a man dishonest in thought and intention.

It seemed to him as though a voice spoke to him out of the darkness, and said, 'How dare you, as a minister, harbour such a thought? How can you preach the gospel of righteousness and contemplate such black dishonesty? How can you ask people to be true when you are so false to yourself and others?'

But he soon succeeded in hushing the voice and banishing the vision. Unfortunately righteousness was not the chief factor in his religion. He had never concerned himself much with the ethics of Christianity. A due observance of the sacraments was with him the all-important thing. If men believed the dogmas of the Church, and conformed to her ritual, they were certain to be safe at last. Had not Christ atoned for all their sins and granted them a policy that covered all their risks? That being so, he might do what was morally wrong without in any way jeopardising his salvation. And with this orthodox and

comforting reflection he retired to bed, and slept soundly the rest of the night.

On the morning of the funeral he was congratulated on his good fortune on all hands, but he refused to be drawn. He admitted having heard the rumours, but declined to say whether they were true or false. Silence, however, is generally supposed to give consent, and the people of London were more than ever convinced that the stories were true.

There was no display of grief at the funeral. Mrs. Preston had never allowed the villagers to familiarise themselves with her face, and so when she died there was no lamentation. The funeral was very simple and very quiet, and when the service was over the Doctor and Steward, and a few of the neighbouring gentry, with the Curate and family solicitor, returned to the Hall to hear the Major's will read again.

Mr. Quayle looked very white and ill. All the time the will was being read his face was drawn as though he were in pain. He felt like a thief in the house, the atmosphere of the room seemed stifling, his lips were dry and livid, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth.

Claire, who sat near, pale, but very beautiful, glanced at him every now and then and wondered what ailed him. She was quite unmoved by the little ceremony. Her thoughts were in the grave, her heart aching with a very bitter grief. It was nothing to her that she was mistress of Lindon Hall. She had never coveted the possession. In spite of the wealth that had been left her she felt unutterably poor and unspeakably sad and lonely.

Directly the little ceremony was over Mr. Quayle stole out of the house without speaking to anyone. He felt as though he would choke if he stayed there any longer. A cold east wind was blowing, for it was early in March, but he took his hat off directly he got out of sight of the house, and stood for a long time bare-headed, feeling as though his brain was on fire.

"God in heaven," he gasped, "I have crossed the Rubicon now and burned the boats. Retreat from henceforth is impossible."

Then he laughed a scornful and defiant laugh.

"Bah!" he said: "I am not the man to be frightened

at shadows. I have done it and am prepared to face the consequences." And he replaced his hat and strode swiftly away.

A little way down the lane, he paused again and laughed softly, bitterly, cynically. "*Mon Dieu*," he exclaimed, "scratch a Russian and you find a Tartar; scratch a parson and you find a—a devil."

The thought seemed to tickle him immensely. He was growing quite reckless. Character deteriorates rapidly. The first devil had returned with several others. He was no longer master of himself. He felt that he had dropped to an infinitely lower plane than he had ever before occupied, and yet the strange thing was, he had for the moment no regret or compunction. He felt that he could do anything that was bad: rob a grave if need be, and revel in the loathsome work. He had been disobedient to the heavenly vision, and was now paying the penalty in moral deterioration and decay.

CHAPTER XXXII.

INTO THE OUTER DARKNESS.

“ I part with thee,
As wretches that are doubtful of hereafter
Part with their lives ; unwilling, loath, and fearful,
And trembling at futurity.”

Rowe.

A FEW days after the events recorded in the last chapter Eric Strome stole quietly away from Priory Mere one evening after dark, and went forth to face the world alone. He did not overburden himself with luggage ; indeed, he had not much to burden himself with. All that he cared to possess he packed in a small portmanteau, which, by the aid of a stout stick across his shoulder, he carried without difficulty. He waited until nightfall before he took his departure, for he had no wish to be seen, and, in fact, no wish to see. His one desire was to slip away unobserved, to plunge into the outer darkness and be forgotten.

The events which led to his departure were not of a very edifying character, and so shall be summarised as briefly as possible. Hardman set the ball rolling by informing him, one evening when they were alone, that he had given up the idea of his going to Cambridge.

For a moment our hero stood aghast, scarcely able to credit the testimony of his own senses. He had built so much on going to Cambridge, had anticipated it as such a welcome change from the gloom and stagnation of Priory Mere and the unwelcome company of Herbert Saville, that to be told bluntly, without any previous warning, that he was not to go, was like receiving a heavy blow, which for a moment stunned him.

“ I do not quite understand, uncle,” he said mildly, as

soon as he had recovered himself. "Do you mean that I am to wait another term, or that——"

"You will wait another year, at least," Hardman interposed snappishly; "but the chances are you will not go at all."

"Not go at all?" Eric echoed; "I thought the matter had been settled long since."

"Then you thought wrong," was the reply. "It has been talked about, I admit, but never settled. The truth is, I have got to think better of it."

"Or worse of it," Eric interjected.

"Don't interrupt, please," Hardman snarled. "I tell you I have thought *better* of it. I don't see why I should go on spending money on you all the days of my life, and get no return for it. I have spent a good deal more on you already than you will ever be worth, and it is time now you earned something for yourself."

"I did not know that you ever wished me to earn anything," Eric said, with rising temper. "If you meant me to earn my own living you should, at least, in common fairness, have told me so."

"I tell you so now; isn't that enough?"

"No, it is not enough; indeed, it is cruelly unjust. You know as well as I do that I can do nothing. You have taught me no trade; you have brought me up to no profession."

"And for very sufficient reasons," growled Hardman, growing very pale.

"And what are your reasons, pray?"

"Well, in the first place, I expected you would marry Claire Leicester, and that there would be no necessity."

"And what are your other reasons?"

"I decline to say."

"You might, at least, have the courage of your convictions," Eric said, with a curl of his lip. "For, to be candid, I don't believe what you say."

"Do you call me a liar?" almost screamed Hardman.

"Not in so many words," Eric answered, with provoking coolness. "But if you wanted me to marry Miss Leicester, you acted the part of a madman in bringing me up in the way you have done."

Hardman grew livid. "Look here, young man," he hissed between his clenched teeth.

"Oh, you needn't suppose that I am afraid to look at you," Eric interposed, "or that I am afraid to talk to you. And don't suppose that you are going to deceive me with your cant. The reasons you have hinted at for this change in your plans are not the true ones. You have advanced so much money to that humbug Saville, that the truth is you can't afford to send me to Cambridge just at present."

Hardman dropped into a chair as though he had been shot.

"Who has been talking to you? What do you know?" he gasped.

"I decline to say who has been talking to me, or how much I know," was the defiant answer.

Then Hardman lost all control of himself, and, for five minutes, he poured out an unceasing torrent of abuse, in which Eric heard himself called a pauper, a beggar, a sponge, a sneak, and a dozen other things equally uncomplimentary.

For two days after that they did not speak. Indeed, they scarcely saw each other, for Hardman spent nearly all his time with Saville. That gentleman was as calm and gracious as ever. His normal expression was one of ineffable meekness. He was only a tutor toiling for a small salary, and it therefore did not become him to put on airs. He walked about the house with the tread of a cat, and never seemed to interfere in any matter outside his own special duties. It was clear, however, that Hardman consulted him about everything, and that, to all intents and purposes, he was master of Priory Mere. Of late he had been very busy correcting the proof-sheets of his great work which was to revolutionise Christendom, and secure for himself and Hardman everlasting fame. At any rate, large quantities of printed matter were constantly arriving at Priory Mere, and the assumption was that these were the proof-sheets of his forthcoming work.

On the third morning after his quarrel with Hardman, Eric came across Homer and Sarah in tears. This was such an unusual circumstance that he insisted on knowing what was the matter.

"Oh, Master Eric, we've been dismissed," sobbed Sarah, and then burst into a violent paroxysm of weeping.

"Aye," said Homer, brushing his sleeve quickly across his eyes, "after well on to forty years o' faithful service we be driven forth in disgrace.

"In disgrace?" questioned Eric.

"Aye, the master says as how we've been robbing him, year in an' year out, for years past."

"No; surely he can't mean that," Eric said.

"That's what he says," Homer moaned; "and it comes very hard after all these years. I was hopin' I should end my days at Priory Mere, but the Lord's will be done"; and he began to mop his eyes with his red pocket handkerchief.

"There's some wickedness at the bottom o' all this," sobbed Sarah.

"Wickedness! I should think there is," said Eric, "and it is not difficult to guess at whose door it lies."

"Then you think it's 'im?" said Homer, looking up with interest.

"You mean Saville."

"Aye!"

"I'm sure he's at the bottom of it all," said Eric. "The villain, I should like to wring his neck."

"Nay, nay, Master Eric; we must remember what the Book says."

• "Well, what does it say, Homer?"

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, said the Lord."

"And you believe that, do you?"

"Aye, that I do."

"I wish I did," was the answer. "If one could only feel certain that that smooth-faced devil would get his deserts one would sleep more comfortably."

"But he will get 'em," said Homer, "as sure as eggs is eggs."

"And when he does, may I be there to see," said Eric. "But, really, this is too bad. I will speak to my uncle at once about it," and he started off to hunt up that worthy individual.

Hardman, however, was closeted with Saville, and could not be seen, nor was it till after lunch that Eric could obtain the desired interview.

"If you wish to speak with me I shall be found in the library," Hardman said, as he rose from the table, and, with an air of great pomposity, he marched out of the room.

Eric waited a few minutes, and then followed him. Hardman did not notice him when he entered the library; did not notice him while he deliberately shut the door, and stood with his back against it. He was busy reading a letter, and, when he had finished it, he turned back and read the last page again.

Eric watched him narrowly, and noted the changes that thirteen or fourteen years had wrought in his appearance. His hair and beard were now plentifully sprinkled with grey; the stoop in his shoulders had greatly increased; the occasional wrinkles in his forehead had become permanent furrows; the plaintive expression of eyes and lips had grown into a look of utter hopelessness.

Eric's heart softened a little towards him. His life—now hasting to its close—had been so little, so narrow, so destitute of any great joy, or even noble ambition. He had spent his days and years in petty pursuits, which had yielded him very little pleasure, and which had been of no benefit to any one else. He had sneered at religion, which—it could not be denied—filled the lives of so many people with pleasure and usefulness; and had deliberately crushed out the one hope that would explain life's riddle and make it bearable. And this was the result of his petty dabbings in science and philosophy, this the harvest of his agnosticism: a life narrowed, soured, spoiled with petty meannesses and hateful hypocrisies; a life devoid of all those higher impulses which make men great and noble; a life self-centered and selfish, from which had flowed no stream of blessing to cheer and enrich the lives of others.

"And is this what my life is to be?" he thought; but his uncle put a sudden stop to his reflections.

"You wish to speak with me, I think?" he said, looking up from the letter which he still held in his hand.

"Yes, uncle," he answered, mildly. "I wish to speak with you respecting Homer and Sarah."

"Well; and what of them?"

"They say you have dismissed them; pray, is that so?"

"And, if so, may I ask what business it is of yours?"

"Surely I am entitled to know——" he began.

"You are entitled to know nothing as far as this establishment is concerned."

• "And is a stranger to have all your confidences, and rule this place?"

The question seemed to stab him to the quick. He rose quickly to his feet, livid and trembling, and then fell a storm of words which had better not be recorded. Eric, stung to madness by his taunts, and smarting under the insults he had received three days previously, lost all control of himself. And, for nearly an hour, the storm raged furiously. Neither was in the humour to spare the other. Grievances that had been buried for years were disinterred, and every slight was magnified a thousandfold.

Hardman, exhausted at length by the intensity of his passion, dropped into a chair, panting and breathless, while Eric, having gained his opportunity, stormed on.

But the older man's turn came again, and, when he could find utterance, he hissed forth: "You leave this house for ever, viper that you are. I have warmed you for years at my breast, and now you have stung me. Go, and go at once; not another night shall you spend under this roof."

"Go," said Eric, stretching himself to his full height, "yes, I go gladly, thankful to escape the baleful influences of this place."

• "Base creature!" gasped Hardman.

"If I am base, I am what you have made me. You have tried an experiment, and evidently you are not satisfied with the result. Did you expect your pessimism would produce a saint? or that your agnosticism would breed virtue? You have made me ascynical, and perhaps as selfish, as yourself. You have taught me that self is the only thing we have to live for, and that policy is life's true guide. You have taught me that I am accountable to no one, that right and wrong are relative terms, and that death is the one supreme good, because it ends everything. Then, why blame me because I am not a paragon of virtue? Did you think that true nobility, that moral excellence could grow in such an atmosphere? If I am a viper, blame yourself. I am the logical product of your creed. Instead of being angry and disappointed, you

should rejoice that I am what you have been trying all along to make me. I am surprised that a philosopher of your standing should be so illogical and unreasonable. Why don't you grasp my hand and praise me?"

Hardman fairly writhed; but Eric gave him no time to speak.

"You will excuse me speaking so plainly," he went on, in his most defiant and cynical mood. "I shall not have another opportunity. I go forth alone to-night to face the world, to sink or swim, as the case may be. It matters little which; in a few years at most death will wrap me in eternal silence. Perhaps I shall be as fortunate as Saville in getting hold of some philosopher who will let me rob him; perhaps I shall find fewer fools in the world than I imagine. But heed my words. You will reap further fruits of your philosophy yet. You trust Saville implicitly—a man whose guide is policy, whose end is self; a man who believes that what is good for himself is right, and that what is bad for himself is wrong; a man who sneers at conscience, and denies any Divine authority for the Ten Commandments; who lives only for this life, and believes that to feather his own nest is his only concern. Belogical, man. We have no religion to hold us in check, or conscience to disturb our sleep. To be consistent with our creed we have no business to concern ourselves about other people, no ground for trusting them. What cares Saville for you? If he has the chance of robbing you, and doesn't, isn't he a fool? There, I have done. Don't repent anything you have done, for repentance is a Christian virtue, and that would be unworthy of you. Adieu!"

And, without waiting for his uncle to reply, he opened the door and passed out. Going at once to his own room, he bolted the door, and began to gather together the few things he felt he would like to take with him.

He did not give himself any time for reflection. He would not trust himself to look into the future. The spirit of "Don't care" had taken full possession of him, and he cherished it by every means in his power. When the dinner bell rang he went and took his place at the table as though nothing had happened, and talked to Saville as though they were the best of friends.

Hardman looked at him from under his brows, and

wondered whether his cheerfulness was real or mere bravado, and whether he intended to take his dismissal seriously or stay on and defy him. His anger was cooling somewhat, and he would gladly have recalled some of the words he had spoken, particularly those which meant his nephew's banishment from Priory Mere, but he had not the courage to unsay anything he had said, and so the dinner ended without any sign of reconciliation.

Eric waited until the house was quiet, then softly stole away, and gently closed the door behind him. He would have liked to have said good-bye to Homer and Sarah, but felt he dared not trust himself to do so. Next to Claire, his heart went out to the cheerful old Christians who had watched over him from his childhood, but he knew that if he went to see them their tears would unman him.

At the bend of the road he stood for a few moments and looked back, but only a dim outline of the old house loomed up before him. And then he thought of that rainy October afternoon, now so many years ago, when first he came to Priory Mere. How far away it seemed, and what a weary stretch of time lay between now and then.

He sighed a little as he turned away his head to pursue his lonely journey. It seemed very strange to be going away never to return, yet he did not altogether regret it. Since Claire was lost to him, and there was no longer any comfort at Priory Mere, he might as well face the world for himself: though, alas! he little dreamed then what facing the world meant.

Through the village of Lindon he stole with almost noiseless steps, and still on past the gates of Lindon Hall; then the wide country loomed dimly before him, without a light or a human dwelling anywhere.

"Ah! it looks a bit lonely," he said, "but what does it matter?" and a moment later he had vanished into the outer darkness.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

COWARD CONSCIENCE.

“ O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me !
The lights burn blue.—It is now dead midnight.
Cold, fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
What do I fear ? Myself ? ”

SHAKESPEARE.

MORE than a week elapsed before the news reached Lindon that Eric had left Priory Mere ; but when the news did leak out, little else was talked about for many days.* Speculation became rife as to the reasons of his departure, and a dozen theories were current, and were eagerly discussed ; none of which, however, was entirely satisfactory or convincing.

The Rev. Heber Quayle heard the news with a sigh of relief. Ever since the funeral he had been almost afraid to venture out of doors, lest he should meet the man he had wronged. He felt that he was not quite master of himself yet, and was fearful lest he should betray himself in any way. Sometimes he felt reckless and defiant enough for anything, and would even chuckle with satisfaction over the part he had played. But, unfortunately for his peace, his conscience had an unhappy knack of starting up suddenly and unexpectedly from its sleep, and of lifting up its voice in fearful condemnation.

Once or twice he had awakened in the middle of the night with a distinct and vivid impression that some one had spoken to him. So vivid, indeed, had been the impression, that he had got out of bed, lighted his candle, and looked under the bed and into the wardrobe, as well as examined window and door, to be sure no one was in the room.

Then had followed a long and painful struggle with

himself, in which he had to fight the old battle over again, and march in array all the arguments and sophistries by which he had satisfied his conscience at the first.

During the second of these struggles he began to fear that he had paid too great a price for the vantage ground he had won. If the battle was to be a never-ending one! If conscience could not and would not be silenced! If, in the midst of his pleasure and prosperity, a great terror might at any moment suddenly and unexpectedly creep over him! If his sleep was to be constantly disturbed by dreams that were three parts reality, he had better, a thousand times better, have remained a poor but honest curate all the days of his life.

By some strange fatality, he selected on the following day a sermon on the text, "For a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." He had not been able to make a new sermon, his thoughts had been too much engrossed with other things, and so he picked a sermon at random from a little pile he always had ready in case of emergency. He could almost have cursed himself for his carelessness when he began to preach it. Every word was a stab, every sentence a biting rebuke. Years before he had written the sermon, when his experience was much narrower, and his knowledge of the world much less than now, yet it seemed almost prophetic. It spoke of a man losing honour and manhood to win wealth and position, and of the folly of the exchange, and portrayed in language, all too forceful and vivid for his present temper, the growing bitterness of a soul that had given place to the devil. It declared that life's true possession—the possession without which all else was vanity—was a clean conscience and a heart at rest with God, and that the man who had lost this had lost all, though he might be in possession of the world.

With a sense of the grim humour of the situation he read the sermon through to the end without faltering, while his congregation listened with strained attention. Never had they known him throw so much passion and feeling into his preaching before. Never had his voice rung out in such fierce denunciation of wrong.

When the service was over, however, he stole away home in a state of nervous exhaustion that was truly pitiful, and when

he got up to preach in the evening he could scarcely stand. On many a Sunday night he had pronounced the Benediction with a sense of thankfulness that the day's work was done, but never had he felt so thankful as now; yet when the lights in the church were out, and all the congregation had gone, he sat on in his vestry, making no effort to move.

"I will lock the vestry door," he had said to the sexton, "so you need not stay."

Around the old church and across the grassy hillocks the wind moaned and sighed, but he had no ear for the night wind, nor thought for the dead that slept under the grass.

It was of himself he thought—of the wreck he was making of his life, of the thorns he was planting in the way he would have to travel. Oh! to be an honest country curate, with a hundred a-year and a cottage, and sweet, simple-hearted Lucy Lane to be his wife, would, after all, be a thousand times better than being lord of Lindon, with an unspoken sorrow and sin gnawing at his heart all the days of his life. But he had burned the boats and could not go back now. He might face an accusing conscience, but he could not face disgrace. Whatever the penalty, he must go on and on to the very end.

The fire was burning low in the grate, but he did not notice it. He sat back in the deep easy-chair with his eyes closed and his hands clasped. On other Sabbath evenings he had been eager to hurry back to the Rectory, for it was his custom to have supper with the Lanes on Sunday nights, with music and singing after. But since the rumour which coupled his name with Claire Leicester's had gone the round of Lindon a marked change had come over the rector and his family. Not that anything had been said; for, indeed, what could they say? They could not even accuse Mr. Quayle of flirting with Lucy. He had always acted with great caution and circumspection—at least, when any one was about. That he was fond of her anybody could see with half an eye; it was equally clear that Lucy was not indifferent to him; and so it came about that all the Rectory people believed that in due time Mr. Quayle would propose to Lucy, and that, as a matter of course, Lucy would accept him.

Poor old Mr. Lane hailed the prospect with lively satisfaction; his life had been so long trembling in the balance

that it was a comfort to him to think that when he was gone one of his children, at least, would be comfortably settled, and in the dear old home that had been theirs so long. That Mr. Quayle would be his successor he had no doubt, nor would he have had it otherwise. He liked the young man—liked his zeal and enthusiasm; and since the conviction had grown in his mind that he would marry Lucy, he liked him all the more.

But this was changed now. Mr. Quayle had fallen suddenly in the Rector's estimation, and in the estimation of all the family. Like others, he had become corrupted by the love of filthy lucre. He was going to marry for wealth and position. They did not believe he cared two straws for Claire Leicester. Why should he? In comparison with Lucy she was nowhere—Lucy was a beauty, which was more than could be said of any one else in the parish.

Among themselves they discussed the matter with great energy and not a little bitterness. Miss Lane, who was once engaged for three brief months to a consumptive widower, who died before the wedding could take place, and who ever since had carried his likeness next her heart, and had worn his heavy seal ring upon her forefinger, was loud in her denunciations of the heartless, frivolous, flirting young men of the present generation, of whom Mr. Quayle was a type.

"I am ashamed of the whole brood of them," she said, with energy, looking fondly the while upon her dead lover's ring. "My dear Josephus would have scorned to have acted such a part."

"Ah! my dear, he was one in a thousand," said Mrs. Lane, pathetically.

"Indeed, he was," said Miss Lane, with a little gasp. "But as for Mr. Quayle, I'm ashamed of him. If I were father I would dismiss him at once and advertise for another curate."

"No, no, my child," said the old man, "that would be misconstrued; moreover, it would not be a Christian act."

"I don't know about that," was the reply; "anyhow, we can let him see by our manner that we don't approve of such carryings-on."

"Ah, my dear, there's our difficulty," said Mrs. Lane. "He has said nothing and done nothing that we can take

hold of. He has made love with his eyes, but, unfortunately, eyes can't be brought forward as evidence."

"No; but when my dear Josephus made eyes at me I soon brought him to words, and if Lucy hadn't been a fool——"

But at this point Lucy abruptly marched out of the room. Such discussions were intensely painful to her. Though Mr. Quayle had deceived her he was her heart's idol still, and she could not bear to hear him abused. In her heart she had only pity for him. The temptation had been too strong. He had cast away love for gold, as many another man had done, and so, after all, was to be pitied rather than blamed.

Mr. Quayle was quick to note the change that had come over the Rector and his family, and rightly divined the reason, and so, as the days passed on, he saw less and less of them. It was a deprivation to miss the Sunday night's supper, but there was no help for it. He would wait till the meal was ended, and then go home, and get Bessie, the maid, to make him a cup of cocoa and a sandwich, after which he would creep quietly off to bed.

So he sat in the dingy vestry while the fire sank lower and lower, and the wind wailed more and more dolefully outside. He did not heed the flight of time, nor guess how late it was growing.

At length he started suddenly, as a gust of wind swept mournfully through the gloomy old church.

"I wonder what Jackson has come back for," he said to himself; "I told him I would put the lights out when I left, and lock the door."

Then the sound of muffled footsteps fell on his ear, and came nearer and still nearer the vestry door.

"I wish the fellow would leave me in peace," he muttered, half-savagely. "I hate being disturbed when I want to be alone."

The next moment the door opened silently, and there stood before him—horrors!—not Jackson, but Major Preston.

He tried to scream, tried to rise from his chair and flee, but the glassy eyes of the dead man held him as in a vice. He could not even shut his eyes or turn away his head. He was compelled to look until every lineament of the

dead man's face and every detail of his dress burned themselves into his brain.

For awhile there was not a sound of any kind to break the awful silence. Even the night wind had ceased to moan in the chimney, and had died away across the graves into absolute stillness; and still the dead man stood before him, erect and motionless, looking at him with glassy, reproachful eyes.

Would he never go away, the Curate wondered. It was awful to be transfixed after that fashion. What a fool he had been to remain in the vestry after all the congregation had gone. It would be a lesson to him as long as he lived.

Then the Major slowly raised his hand. Oh! how well he remembered that hand, worn and wasted with long sickness.

He tried again to get out of his chair, but in vain.

"You wonder why I am here?" the Major spake at last.

Then his tongue was unloosed. "No, no," he said, pitifully. "I know why you have come!"

"I trusted you," was the reproachful answer. "I believed you to be a man of God. Who else could I trust if not my clergyman? And this is the way you have betrayed——"

"Oh, spare me," gasped the curate. "I was sorely tempted. I thought what I did might be for the best. Your son is an infidel, and I considered the good of the Church."

"Cease your hypocrisy!" was the stern reply. "It was the lust of power and position and gold that tempted you, and you were all too ready to yield. You let the devil enter your soul ere you left my room."

"How do you know that?" was the quick reply.

"Never mind how I know. I know many things that would astonish you. Now I warn you that, unless you make speedy reparation, I will——"

"Oh, don't, don't!" said the curate, putting up his hand. "I will do anything. I will go to Priory Mere to-night. I will go at once and tell him all."

"You have not destroyed the papers, I know."

"No, no, they are safe enough. I have tried to destroy

them many times, but I never could do it somehow. Oh, leave me, please."

"And you promise?"

"By Heaven I do!"

Then a loud gust of wind came up across the graves, and howled in the chimney, and rattled all the windows and doors as though an earthquake had shaken them.

Mr. Quayle started and opened his eyes. The lights were still burning steadily, but the fire was quite out. His neck was aching with being bent so long, his legs were stiff and cramped.

"Good heavens! what a horrid dream," he exclaimed, rising quickly to his feet and staring uneasily around him.

He was still shaking all over, as though smitten with ague. He was too terrified to put the lights out, but seizing his hat he rushed out into the churchyard, and slammed the door behind him. Overhead the stars were burning brightly, and around him the night wind played, fanning with grateful coolness his hot and throbbing temples; but he never paused for a moment until he had cleared the churchyard and found his hand upon the latch of the Rectory gate. Then he halted and hesitated. Should he go to Priory Mere at once and make a clean breast of it? These constantly recurring fits of terror were making life a martyrdom. These dreams—if dreams they were—were becoming more and more weird and horrible. Indeed, he was still half disposed to think he had seen the Major's ghost. He had heard of people being haunted until reparation had been made for wrongs committed. What if the spirit of the dead Major should haunt him? The thought was so horrible that it made him shudder until his teeth chattered.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "I cannot stand this; I had better make a clean breast of it, and then go away. In some out-of-the-way corner I may bury myself, and in time forget it. Anything is better than this haunting terror."

And he started off almost at a run in the direction of Priory Mere, and no sooner had he done so than a great change came over him. He felt so light and jubilant, so far removed from fear, so joyful in the consciousness that

at last he was doing the right thing, that he could almost have sung as he sped on under the silent stars. All anxiety respecting the future was taken away. He might have to starve and die; it did not matter. He would be able to eat his last crust with a clear conscience, and die at peace with all men.

But, alas, for his righteous purpose! when he reached Priory Mere, he found the house in darkness. All the inmates were in bed, and fast asleep.

"Ah, well," he said, with a little sigh, "to-morrow, perhaps, will do as well," and he wended his way home again, but with slower steps.

But with the morrow's sun the old spirit had taken possession of him again, and the terror of the previous night had all departed.

"I nearly made a fool of myself last night," he said to himself, as he lingered over his breakfast. "I must be getting morbid, surely, when dreams can distress me so much." •

So the day passed, and he did not go to Priory Mere, he went to Lindon Hall instead, and as his eye wandered over the broad estate, crowned with its stately mansion, all desire to make reparation passed away.

So the days passed on till the news reached Lindon that Eric Strome had left Priory Mere, and had gone away, no one knew whither; then Mr. Quayle moved freely about once more, and fervently hoped that he would never come back again; yet his mind was never wholly at rest. He could not banish the consciousness that he had been guilty of a great wrong. Though his conscience had been seared, it was not dead; every now and then it started into vigorous life, and sometimes for a whole night he lay writhing in perfect terror, unable to snatch a wink of sleep, and even when daylight came the depression did not always pass away.

As time went on, however, he found that work was the best antidote, and he fancied, also, that it might be some atonement. He tried to persuade himself that he could not make restitution now, for the simple reason that he did not know where Eric was; but he might make amends in some measure by an increase of zeal. In this way his conscience might be set at rest in time, and a wrong to

one man might yield a rich harvest of blessings to many.

From henceforth, outwardly, his life was one of burning zeal and enthusiasm, while his praise was on the lips of all men. Much of the old bigotry gave place to a broad and generous charity, and no sacrifice seemed too great if thereby he could lighten the burden of any sad or sorrow-smitten heart in the parish. Those who had admired him before admired him doubly now. There was no longer a sign of frivolity in his demeanour. He was sober beyond his years, gentle and sympathetic beyond expression. He might have passed through some great bereavement, so chastened was he in life and speech.

Claire watched his life of patient toil with growing admiration, and if she did not love him for his own sake, yet for his works' sake she permitted to go out to him a large measure of affection. And so, when the day came that he spoke to her respecting her aunt's last wish, what answer could she make? She was alone in the world and needed some one to lean upon, and who else in the world could she trust so fully as him?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CHANGES.

“Not in vain the distance beacons,
Forward, forward, let us range;
Let the great world spin for ever
Down the ringing grooves of change.”

TENNYSON.

IF Eric had been translated to the moon he could not have vanished more completely. Homer, who was nearly broken-hearted, did succeed in tracing him as far as Ribblesford, but beyond that no trace of the fugitive could be found. At first Homer was very sanguine, not only that he would find him, but that he would be able to bring him back again.

“He belongs here, Sarah,” he said to his wife as they discussed the matter on the day following Eric’s departure. “He’s the rightful heir of Priory Mere. An’ he’s as much right here as the master has himself. An’ it’s my duty to go an’ search for him an’ bring him home again.”

“Perhaps the master don’t want him,” said Sarah, with brimming eyes. “Who knows what’s passed atween ’em?”

“I don’t care whether he wants ’im or no,” said Homer, doggedly. “Right’s right, and he ain’t to be done out o’ his own by that sleek-faced Saville, if I can ’elp it.”

“But what can we do?” said Sarah, tearfully. “We have to leave oursel’s.”

“Aye, I know that,” Homer answered. “But we be only servants. We’re subject to a month’s notice any time. But Master Eric ain’t no servant. He’s the master’s own nevvv, an’ there ain’t nobody to take to the property but ’im.”

“The master can will it to anybody as he likes,” said Sarah.

"That may be true," Homer answered; "but I don't believe at bottom he wants anyone to 'ave it but Master Eric. Anyhow, I'm off to search for 'im."

"Without askin' the master?"

"Aye. I'm a-goin' to take French leave. I'm under notice to quit, so it don't matter whether he's pleased or vexed."

"But where will you go?"

"To Yarncaster, and if I can't find no trace of 'im there, I'll go to-morrow to Ribbleford."

"I don't seem to 'ave no faith somehow," Sarah answered, wiping her eyes with her apron. "He wouldn't 'ave gone away unless he meant it; an' when he makes up his mind he ain't the sort to change."

Homer smiled grimly. "Seems to me, Sarah," he said, "that you are the disbelievin' Thomas this time."

"I may be, 'Omer," she answered, "but I can't help it."

"Anyhow, 'ere's hoff," said Homer, suiting the action to the word.

"An' the Lord go with thee," said Sarah.

Nothing, however, came of his visit to Yarncaster. Nor did he succeed in getting any reliable information till nearly a fortnight later, and even then what he learned proved of no value.

"I've got to the end of the tether, Sarah," he said one night on his return, as he threw himself wearily into his chair. "He's left Ribbleford, that's sartin, but where he's gone the Lord only knows."

"Are 'e sure he's ever been to Ribbleford," Sarah asked, in a doubtful tone of voice.

"Aye, there's no doubt on that score. He were seen the evenin' after he left 'ere, standin' at a street corner watchin' a percession."

"What kind o' procession?"

"Well, that I can't make out quite. It's some new kind o' religion as has just come out. They march through the streets wi' bands an' drums and tambourines an' flags a-flyin', an' the leader walks backwards a-swingin' his arms about, an' the lasses shout an' sing an' carry on general."

"The lasses?" questioned Sarah, in astonishment.

"Aye, they be as zealous as the men; an' they stop at the street corners, an' preach, and tell the people to repent and give up their sins, and they're doin' lots o' good in Ribbleford, so it's said."

Sarah shook her head. "I'm afraid they'd do no good to Master Eric," she said.

Homer looked grave. "Yes, the man as saw 'im said he only look'd on an' laughed, and when they'd gone past he turned round an' said, 'I suppose this is the latest development of Christianity?' and then he turned down a narrow street an' was soon out o' sight."

Sarah sighed, and, after a pause, Homer went on again.

"Then he seems to have spent two or three days in searchin' for work."

"What kind o' work?"

"Clerk's work, bookkeeper, timekeeper—anything as was light; but you see he had no trainin' or experience. Then he got into a coal-yard. I've found that out. But he got dismissed after three days because he refused to water the coal sufficient. Then I went to see the man as owned the yard, and he told me a very different story, but I don't believe him, somehow."

"Well, what did he tell you?"

"Well, he said as he found out as the young man was a hinfidel."

• "Well, what 'ad that to do with coals?" Sarah asked, indignantly.

"I don't see that myself," Homer said, scratching his head, "though he did seem to make out a purty good case for himself. He were a very nice-spoken man, with a soft voice, like the purr of a cat; an' he smiled all the time, an' was exceedin' pleasant. He had a round face, wi' small eyes, and were purty big in the waist, an' wore a gold chain. He seemed very humble, an' said how he rose from nothin'."

"Well, what's that to do with Master Eric?" Sarah said, impatiently.

"I'm comin' to that," Homer went on. "He said as 'ow he ran a mission-room on his own account, an' conducted a Bible-class every Sunday, an' that he 'ad a great repitation in the town, an' that it would be fatal to his

reputation, an' fatal to his business, if he were to keep hinfidels in his employ."

"And that's the man as wanted his coals watered! The Lord help us!" and Sarah bounced out of her chair and began to poke the fire in a very vigorous fashion.

"It's very grievin' to me," said Homer, pathetically. "It seems as if Master Eric were fated never to see the best side o' religion."

"He's never seen the best side o' anything," said Sarah.

"I keep hopin' it will all come out right in the end," Homer answered, "but I don't see how. Perhaps the good Lord is loadin' him by a way we know not."

Then Sarah turned round, with the poker still in her hand. "And you say after he left that good man's employ there's been no trace of him?"

"Not a trace, Sarah!"

"Well, then, I sha'n't fret no more about leavin' Priory Mere."

"No?" Homer questioned, looking up.

"No, I sha'n't; there now. Master Eric was the light o' this old place. If he were stayin' 'ere, it 'ud break my heart to leave him; but since he's gone, I don't want to stay. I've loved him as if he were my own; I've watched him from bein' a little, sad-eyed lad grow up to be a great strong man; I've prayed for him night and mornin' ever since he came; and now he's gone, why the place don't seem like Priory Mere no more. No, Homer, I don't want to stay," and Sarah sat down in her chair, and buried her face in her apron.

The next morning, while Homer was busy at work in the garden, he was very much surprised, on looking up, to see Claire Leicester advancing towards him.

Instantly Homer dropped his rake. "Lor' bless my soul, Miss Claire," he exclaimed, "this is a pleasure!"

"You are pleased to see me, are you, Homer?" she asked, her old winsome smile lighting up her face.

"Pleased to see you, Miss Claire! Lor, pleased ain't in it; I'm fair delighted. It makes me think of old times, when we was all young together."

Claire laughed. "Ah, Homer," she said, "that was many years ago."

"Aye, aye," he answered; "time's ever a-movin' on, and sometimes, Miss Claire, believe me, I feel as if I were getting a bit old."

"We are all getting older, Homer," she answered, seriously.

"Nay, Miss Claire, you must not talk that way; you be still in the flower of youth and beauty. But I—well, I fear I've passed my prime."

"But you haven't lost your beauty, Homer."

"Now, Miss Claire," he said, with a broad grin, "you shouldn't poke fun at me in that way."

"Should I not, Homer? Well, we'll be serious now. I have heard that you and Sarah are leaving Priory Mere; is that so?"

"Aye, Miss Claire," and all his mirthfulness departed in a moment. "We have to leave next month."

"And have you got another situation?"

"No, not yet. I did think of taking a little cottage in Lindon, an' tryin' to get a livin' as day-gardener. We've saved a bit of money, and Sarah an' I thought we might rub on till the Lord called us."

"Well, now, Homer, if you and Sarah will come and live at the Hall I shall be delighted. My cook has just left me to get married, and Robin sadly needs help in the garden. What do you say?"

"Say, Miss Claire?" and his lips trembled so that he could hardly speak. "I don't know what to say. I'm fair flabbergasted. It's so sudden and unexpected that I'm struck all of a heap. You don't mean it in charity, Miss Claire?"

"Indeed, Homer, I don't."

"I'd like to work for my livin' as long as I'm able," the old man went on; "I don't want to be a burden to anybody."

"Then you'll come, Homer?"

"Come, Miss Claire! Aye, that I will. It's like a providence; an' won't Master Eric be delighted when he knows."

"Do you know where he is, then?" she asked, quickly.

"Nay! But the Lord knows, and He'll bring him home again some day; I feel sure of that."

To that Claire made no reply, and soon after took her departure. Homer watched her as she made her way along

the garden-path in the direction of the house (for she had decided to call on Sarah) with a half-patnetic look in his eyes.

"Bless her! she's as beautiful as a flower," he said to himself; "but I don't b'lieve she's happy. I wonder if she's a-troublin' about Master Eric? Oh, dear, this is a strange world! If ever two folks were a-mad³ for each other they were, an' yet—an' yet——" And he took up his rake, and began to work again.

A month later he and Sarah were installed in their new home, and a new set of servants presided over the kitchens of Priory Mere. Peggy might have remained if she would, but she had no desire to do so. She was so indignant at the dismissal of Homer and Sarah that nothing could have induced her to remain.

"I'd rather Marry Robin an' get done with it," Peggy said to Sarah, with a good natured laugh; "any road, I sha'n't stay here."

"Well, why doesn't thee marry Robin?" Sarah answered, "I'm sure he's been wantin' thee long enough."

"Aye," giggled Peggy, "he's been hangin' about these ten years; but I don't want a husban' any more than a cat wants pockets."

"Some day thou'lt be glad of a husband," persisted Sarah; "an' men like Robin ain't to be picked up any day."

"Oh, he's right enough," said Peggy. "But I don't believe in being in a hurry."

Robin, however, when he heard that Peggy was leaving Priory Mere, determined to have the matter settled one way or another.

"Look here, Peggy," he said, as they sat alone one evening in the kitchen, "I ain't a-goin' to wait any longer, there now!"

"Oh, indeed?" said Peggy, biting the corner of her apron.

"No, indeed," said Robin; "I've waited long enough."

"Thou'lt have to wait longer yet, anyhow."

"An' you're goin' to put me off again?" he questioned.

"Aye! What's the use o' bein' in such a hurry?"

"Very good, Peggy," he said, getting up from his chair, "if you won't 'ave me I knows somebody as will."

"What's that?" she said, with sudden animation.

"It's what I say," Robin answered, doggedly.

"Oh, but you can't fool me," she said, with a simper.

"I don't want to fool 'o," said Robin; "I were never more serious in my life."

"Who's the other?" she said.

"Never mind who the other is, an' I ain't a-goin' to tell 'o. What I say is, I'm goin' to be married in a month, and if you won't have me, I know who will."

"Then 'ave her," said Peggy, with flashing eyes.

"All right, I will," and Robin put on his hat and made for the door.

But Peggy rushed in front of him and shot the bolt. "Don't go yet, Robin," she said pleadingly, "I was only funnin'."

"But I'm not funnin'," was the answer.

"Come, sit thee down again and take thy hat off," she said.

"No," he said, stubbornly, "I sit down in this room no more until it's settled. I give you one minute longer. You know I prefer you, Peggy, but——"

"Oh, sit down," she said, "and don't look like that."

"Haaf a minute is gone," he answered.

"Oh, Robin!"

"Yes or no!" he asked, defiantly.

"You are hard, Robin."

• "Three moments more," he said.

"As you will, Robin;" and Peggy hid her face in her apron.

Robin took of his hat again and sat down, and for the rest of the evening they talked about what sort of furniture they would like, and who they should invite to the wedding.

To Hardman it seemed no more like home after the departure of Peggy, for she was the last to leave. He felt like a man forsaken—forsaken, too, when most he needed help. He never imagined he would pine so much for old faces and long-familiar voices. It was like a painful dream to him, and every day, for the first few weeks, it seemed harder to realise that Eric, Homer, Sarah and Peggy were all gone, and that he was left alone with strangers. He knew he had acted like a fool, and yet he felt utterly helpless. He had no will of his own. Saville made him do

just what he liked. Fortunately, Saville was a man of honour, and that was the only consolation he had.

As time passed on he grew more reconciled. The new servants were working very satisfactorily. Saville was managing the estate for him with great prudence, and making a lot of money out of the sale of timber, while the investments he had made on his behalf were turning out splendidly. True, his great work was not yet through the press, and somehow every delay meant more money, but in a few months he quite expected to be recouped with compound interest.

Eric's name he never mentioned, though he was constantly in his thoughts. He could not forget that the young man was his dead sister's child, and that he had promised to be as a father to him, and he was not sufficiently dead to all right feeling as to have no compunction or regret. Outwardly, however, he was stern and defiant, except when he was dreamily indifferent under the influence of opium.

So the months dragged their slow lengths along, until Christmas came again; but no word had come from Eric, no trace of him could be found anywhere. He had gone away in the night, and the darkness had swallowed him up. Whether, in his single-handed battle with the world, he had succeeded or failed no one knew. The latter seemed the more probable supposition, for, had he succeeded, most people were of the opinion that he would have informed his friends of his whereabouts.

Homer and Sarah still mourned over him as if he had been their son, nor did Claire forget him or cease to pray for him.

With the advent of Christmas Mary Vincent came for a lengthened visit to Claire. Ever since her aunt's death Claire had been writing to her and pleading with her to come; but Mary had found it no easy matter to get away from her school duties. Now, however, she had given up her situation at Bonn, and had resolved on a twelvemonth's rest before she took another.

Claire, of course, was delighted to see her old friend, and Mary Vincent was equally pleased to see again her favourite pupil. For a week they went nowhere and saw no one. It was pleasure enough to sit by the fire, while the wind whistled without, and talk of old times.

A few days after Christmas, however, Claire said, one morning, "Now, Mary, we must call and see Mr. Hardman to-day. You remember how you flirted with him that day at Bonn? He has often asked after you since; and I am sure he will be delighted to see you."

"Oh, yes, I remember him quite well," Mary answered, with a smile; "I shall be very glad to see him again."

"Then get on your wraps, and we will go at once."

Half-an-hour later they were standing at the door of Priory Mere, little dreaming of what was in store, or how their simple and friendly visit would precipitate events that had been ripening for many a day.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SAVILLE SURPRISED.

“How long shall men deny the flower,
Because its roots are in the earth,
And crave with tears from God the dower
They have, and have despised as dearth;
And scorn as low their human lot,
With frantic pride, too blind to see
That standing on the head makes not
Either for ease or dignity?”

COVENTRY PATMORE.

PHILIP HARDMAN was alone when Claire and Mary Vincent called—pacing restlessly up and down his library, with hands clenched, and mouth working nervously. He was fighting the devil of desire as he had done many times before, and knew only too well that in the end he would be defeated. He had commenced taking opium on Saville's advice to cure, or at any rate to ease, his neuralgia, and had found it such a pleasant medicine and withal so effective, that he had continued it from day to day, and week to week, in constantly increasing doses. At first he had no thought of any danger; did not dream that the habit might become so strong as to completely overmaster him; it was sufficient for him that under the influence of the deadly narcotic he forgot his pain, was lifted above all care and anxiety, and found a sweet tranquility that was like heaven to him.

By-and-by, however, he woke to the consciousness that he was possessed by an overmastering craving that he found almost impossible to resist. He had prided himself on his will-power, and so the knowledge came to him as a painful surprise. In the first instance he had gone to the drug as a means to an end, but now he craved for the thing

itself; he found himself constantly desiring it, and as the desire increased, his power of resistance became sensibly weaker. But it was not until long after Eric had left that he realised the terrible state of slavery to which he had been reduced, and then he made a manful effort to secure his freedom, but, alas, every effort ended in failure. He was ashamed to tell Saville of the pitiable state to which he had been reduced. Saville was so strong and self-reliant that he felt sure he would despise him if he knew. He never thought of blaming his friend for persuading him to take opium in the first instance. The fault was not Saville's. Saville did not know he was such a weak-brained idiot as to let a harmless indulgence grow into a baneful habit. Saville would naturally suppose that he would be able to give it up at any time he liked. Were he in Saville's place he should be of the same opinion. He remembered many years ago laughing a man to scorn who told him he could not help getting drunk, that the appetite and habit had got beyond his control.

Now he was in precisely the same state of bondage. He had formed a habit that completely overmastered him, and was possessed of a craving he could not resist. He felt, too, that the habit, if not checked, meant destruction—moral, mental and physical. True the drug deadened his pain, but it was surely and swiftly undermining his constitution, beclouding his intellect, destroying his will-power, and reducing him to a state of moral cowardice and slavery.

"I am not the man I was," he said to himself. "I am not only weak in body, but I feel mean and contemptible. I *must* conquer this vile appetite, and I will."

And for a few hours he would struggle resolutely with himself, then in a fit of despair would give up the conflict.

On the morning in question he was making another attempt to master himself; but alas! he was fighting without hope. Like a drowning man in mid-ocean he struggled for dear life, knowing all the while that he was destined to go down beneath the unremembering waves.

"I wish I was dead," he said to himself, as with clenched hands he paced restlessly up and down. "Yes, dead! dead!" then he paused suddenly and faced round in the opposite direction.

"Curse Shakespeare," he muttered between his clenched

teeth. "Why did he write such memory-haunting jingle?"

"To sleep! perchance to dream!":

No, no! dreams cannot haunt the brain when it has turned to dust."

Then a knock came to the door, and he dropped into a chair without replying. After a few moments the knock was repeated.

"Come in!" he called, seizing a book and trying to appear deeply engrossed.

The door opened and a maid-servant entered.

"Well?" he said, looking up at length from his book.

"Miss Leicester, from the 'All, sir, an' another lady, wishes to see you."

"Their cards?"

"They didn't send 'em in, sir."

"Hem! You can show them in."

"Yes, sir."

"Claire and another lady," he muttered; "I wonder who she can be."

The next moment Claire stood before him, and, looking beyond her, he saw Mary Vincent standing in the open door.

"Ah!" said Claire, laughing, as she noted the look of pleased surprise upon his face, "I see I have no need to introduce you."

"We do not forget old friends so quickly," he replied, gallantly. And rushing forward he shook Mary Vincent's hand warmly, then led her to a seat. "I am delighted to see you, Miss Vincent," he said; "and you are thrice welcome to Priory Mere. I did not know you were the guest of Miss Claire, or I should have called on you. What a day we had at Bonn together! Old man that I am, I remember it with all the pleasure of a schoolboy."

"I am glad we were able to give you pleasure," she answered, with a smile. "To be able to give others pleasure is better than having pleasure ourselves. Don't you think so, Mr. Hardman?"

"Well, really," he said, taking off his glasses and wiping them, "I cannot say I have thought much on the subject."

"Good," laughed Claire. "I know you are always working at problems of some sort; here's a new one for you."

"Now, Miss Claire," he said, deprecatingly.

"Oh, I mean it," she laughed. "You very learned people are always puzzling your brains over something. And here's Mary's philosophy of life in a nutshell. 'Blessed is he that tries to give others pleasure, for verily he shall find pleasure himself.' Isn't that it, Mary?"

"I don't say, Claire, that that comprehends all my philosophy of life," she said, with a laugh.

"Anyhow, it is a part of it?"

"Yes, I think it is," was the reply.

"Very good! Now, Mr. Hardman, you are a philosopher, and I want to hear you and Mary discuss this question *pro* and *con*."

"Nay, nay, Miss Claire," he said, but with his eyes still fixed on Mary Vincent, "I am not going to argue to-day. Moreover, Miss Vincent is doubtless right. We arrive at some truths by experience. Miss Vincent has experienced the pleasure of giving pleasure to others. I fear I have been too selfish."

This answer silenced Claire, for she felt it was the truth; but Mary Vincent took up the running, and soon turned the conversation into other channels.

How well she talked! How pleasantly and unaffectedly! Hardman listened with increasing interest and pleasure. He forgot his neuralgia, forgot the craving that had been consuming him all the morning. Her presence was like a moral tonic. He felt a better man; and, as he watched the play of her large, mobile face, he thought he had never seen so beautiful a woman. Not beautiful in feature and form merely; it was not that. She had seen the best of life; her youth was passed, her hair was becoming sprinkled with grey; but she was possessed of a beauty that years could not dim or time destroy.

What was this elixir of life that she possessed? He found himself puzzling over the question more and more, and growing out of this was another question: What was this power she had over other people?

"If she lived near me," he found himself saying, "I

should be a better man. She would brace up my strength and help me to conquer."

Then they rose to go.

"No, no! you must not go yet," he said. "You have not seen—ah——" and his mouth shut suddenly, like a gin. For a moment he had forgotten the intervening months. He was back again in the past, and Eric and Homer, Sarah, and Peggy were all about him.

"You have not seen Eric," he was going to say, then, suddenly remembering, he grew silent and looked perplexed.

"Have you something to show us?" Claire asked, innocently.

"No, I think not," he said slowly, making a violent effort to recover himself, but failing in the attempt. "I have nothing now, I am all alone."

Mary Vincent's sympathies were aroused in a moment. "I am so sorry your nephew has left you. Of course I do not understand, but it seems a great pity."

"You think so, Miss Vincent? Ah, well, I don't know. He did not seem quite happy here."

"And you do not seem quite happy without him," she said, with charming candour.

"Happiness is not for mortals," he answered, abruptly. "No one can be happy in a world like this."

"And why not, Mr. Hardman?"

"Why not? Because everything goes by the rule of contrary, because the things you desire you never get, and what you love you always lose. Because hope is a cheat and faith a delusion. Because we all play at cross purposes, women as well as men. Because women steal away men's hearts, and then fling back their love with scorn."

Claire blushed painfully, then turned suddenly round toward the bookshelves, and appeared deeply interested in scanning the titles of a number of comparatively new volumes.

"Ah, Mr. Hardman, I fear you are in a pessimistic mood to-day," Mary said, with a laugh, "so I will not argue with you."

"Facts cannot be overturned by arguments," he answered, bitterly; "my memory reaches back now over

fifty years. Ah, I am getting old ; but it does not matter. Experience tells the same story year after year, and Eric, poor lad, is but a replica of myself."

Mary was silent for a moment, then asked, "Do you expect him home again soon?"

"Expect him? No! he will not come home again. Let me think," and he pressed his hand to his forehead. "It is nearly a year; is it not, since he went away? and I have never even heard from him."

"What a pity."

"As to that, I don't know; perhaps we are better apart. I had some liking for the lad when he *was* a lad, but as he grew older he became less tractable, and, finding we could not agree, he went."

"He will surely forget that in time, and come home again," Mary answered.

"If that were all, he might return," was the answer; "but Miss Claire, there, knows another and a stronger reason."

"Were you speaking to me, Mr. Hardman?" Claire asked, turning round, with flaming cheeks.

"Not to you, Miss Claire, though I mentioned your name. Miss Vincent and I were talking about my nephew."

"Yes, I understand!"

"I did not introduce the subject," Hardman said, with some agitation; "perhaps now I ought to let it drop. Still, there need be no mystery."

"Please say no more," she said, growing suddenly pale.

"As you wish," he replied. "I—I——"

Then a knock came to the door, and a moment later Saville entered.

"I beg pardon," he said, hurriedly, "I thought, sir, you were alone," and he nearly backed out of the room again. But Hardman detained him.

"Come in, Mr. Saville, and let me introduce you to these ladies," he said. "Miss Leicester, of course, you know, and this is a friend of hers, Miss Vincent."

But Mary had dropped suddenly into a chair, white and panting, and seemed for the moment as if she would faint.

Saville for a moment stood in the middle of the room, staring at her as if transfixed, his face drawn, his lips

bloodless. Then, making a desperate effort, he whispered hoarsely to Hardman, "The lady is ill," and quickly left the room.

In a moment Hardman and Claire had rushed to Mary's help, paying no further heed to Saville.

But Mary put out her hand, entreatingly. "No, don't trouble," she said; "I shall be all right again in a moment."

"Why, dear, this is something new in your experience," Claire said, anxiously.

"Not altogether," was the quiet answer; "but, see, I am all right again. Did I frighten the gentleman away?"

"I really think you did," said Hardman, with a poor attempt at a laugh. "But Saville is of a very shy and retiring disposition."

"You had better look him up," said Claire, "for really he seemed very agitated about something."

"Oh, he's right enough," said Hardman; "my concern is for Miss Vincent."

"Please don't concern yourself about me," she said, rising to her feet; "I am very sorry to have troubled you, but I am all right again, and am ready and able to go."

"I wish I could have kept you longer," said Hardman, gallantly. "But you must come again, and come soon." And he went with them to the door and bowed them out.

Meanwhile, Saville was pacing his room in a state of great agitation.

"Curse my luck," he said to himself, with glaring eyes and clenched hands. "To think she should have found me here in this out-of-the-way corner of the earth! But it has always been so. My luck has ever failed me at the last moment. Now what is to be done?"

And he dropped into his chair, and frowned at the fire.

"If she had stayed away a week longer I would not have cared," he went on; "for she will lose no time to circumvent me. And everything was working so sweetly, too," and he got up again and stamped with his foot, uttering the while a number of expletives which we will not record.

Then a knock came to the door, and instantly, resuming his seat he took up a pen and began to scribble.

"Come in," he called, after a moment.

"I don't wish to disturb you," said Hardman, pushing open the door. "I see you are busy, as usual."

"Oh, my work can wait," he said, dropping his pen. "Have the ladies gone?"

"Yes; they have just left."

"Sorry I intruded just now, particularly as one of the ladies seemed unwell."

"It was only momentary; but you soon retreated."

"Yes; I'm not a ladies' man. Can't do with their fads and whims."

"I think you would like Miss Vincent; she is a very fine woman indeed."

"Vincent is her name, is it? I did not quite catch it when you introduced me. However, that is no great matter. I called to tell you that the directors of the Bear Consols Hematite Company have decided to declare a dividend at the rate of 35 per cent. at their meeting to-morrow. I have just received a private and confidential from the chairman to that effect, and that they intend issuing £25,000 fresh stock at par to the shareholders; allotments to be in order of application. In other words, 'first come first served.'"

Hardman rubbed his hands gleefully. "Thirty-five per cent.," he said, with energy. "Splendid! Why, three years of that and you double your capital."

"Just so," said Saville. "My only regret is, that I have no capital to invest."

"And all mine is invested," said Hardman.

"Ah, that's a pity. Could you not get an over-draft from the bank of £500 or a £1,000? You see, if I could send off your application with cheque to-night, you would be amongst the first to apply."

"That is true," said Hardman. "I will drive over to Yarncaster at once and see the manager."

"It would be well to do so, I think," said Saville, "for such a chance is not likely to occur again."

Hardman pulled out his watch. "I can get there easily before the bank closes," he said, "and I think my credit is good for a thousand, at least."

"Beautiful!" said Saville a few minutes later, when Hardman had disappeared. "The old fool has swallowed the bait more readily than I expected; but he will need an

extra dose of his neuralgia mixture when he comes home to-night."

An hour later Saville had a long and earnest conversation with the housekeeper, then he retired again to his room and locked the door, and until dark was busy burning papers and letters, and putting his room in order.

"These sudden surprises," he said, "necessitate sudden action. But I think I shall be equal to the occasion. Perhaps my luck will not leave me entirely after all." And he smiled grimly. "I would rather have remained, however, a little while longer, for I am not likely to find a more comfortable shop."

After a while he went downstairs and had another chat with the housekeeper. Then he put on his coat and took a walk down the drive.

"I shall feel a bit anxious until he gets back," he said. "Ah! if *she* sees him, my game is up. But that is not very likely. She will keep indoors the rest of the day; the weather is too cold to tempt her out again. I wonder what her move will be, and when?"

Then he paused as the sound of carriage wheels fell on his ears. "Here he is at last," he said, and he turned on his heel and hurried back to the house.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A PAINFUL AWAKENING.

- “Ye dreamers wild! eschew the trance
Which fond illusion weaves,
And spurn the idle thought that chance
Will bring you golden sheaves.
But when the loud alarm is rung,
To action prompt be stirred,
And wrestle strong to rank among
The Doers of the Word.”

ANON.

SAVILLE was at the door when Hardman alighted. “You are late, sir,” he said, in his most deferential tone.

“I have made a call,” was the cold reply, and Hardman hurried past him into the library.

Saville shrugged his shoulders, for he felt in a moment the change in tone and manner; but he was not easily discomfited. So, following his patron into the library, he sat himself down and waited.

Hardman fidgeted himself for several minutes, then, facing suddenly round, he said, mildly, “I shall not require your services to-night, Mr. Saville.”

“You have not forgotten, I presume, that the post goes in half an-hour?” was the reply.

“No; but I have nothing to post to-night.”

“Then the bank declines——”

“I have not been to the bank.”

“I beg pardon, I thought that was your special object in going to Yarncaster this afternoon.”

“I have thought better of it.”

“Quite right, sir; it makes no difference to me. I have only advised you in your own interests.”

“I am not sure of that. Indeed, I have had doubts raised. I have had a conversation with Miss Vincent.”

"The lady I saw here this morning?"

"The same. I saw her on my way to Yarncaster. I have called at the Hall on my return. Miss Vincent knows you."

"Indeed? That is strange, as I never remember seeing her, or even hearing of her, before."

"Mr. Saville, what am I to believe?" said Hardman, with knitted brows and a look of perplexity in his eyes.

"My dear sir," said Saville, smiling, "that is always a difficult question to answer. What to believe or what not to believe has perplexed profounder men than either of us."

"But Miss Vincent says she is positive she knows you."

"That is quite possible, though, for my own part, I never remember meeting her before."

"But she declares your name is not Saville at all."

"Interesting, no doubt, though I think I would prefer to take the evidence of the parish register on that question."

"You think she is mistaken, then?"

"What do you think, Mr. Hardman?"

"I don't know what to think. She seemed so positive. And she is not the sort of woman to be led away by fancies."

"My dear sir," said Saville, still smiling, "if you were some two or three hundred miles from your home, and some strange lady caught just a glimpse of your face, and then went away and said you were not Philip Hardman at all, but John Smith, of Smithville, what would you say?"

"I should say the woman was a fool," said Hardman, quickly.

"Nay, nay! you would say the lady was mistaken. Evidently I strongly resemble some one this lady knows. I hope the 'some one' bears a good reputation."

"On the contrary, she says your name is William Coon, and that you are a villain of the worst type."

"Oh, come, this is serious," said Saville, looking grave. "However, if you like I will go with you to the Hall to-morrow morning and let the lady satisfy herself that she is mistaken."

"You are prepared to do that, Mr. Saville?"

"Quite prepared. Indeed, I am anxious to do so. The sooner such mistakes are rectified the better. Is it too late to go to-night?"

"Yes; we will not disturb them to-night. And, really, I have no longer any misgiving. Forgive me, Mr. Saville, for doubting you. I ought not to have done so; you have always been the soul of honour and of candour."

"Thank you for saying so," said Saville, with a smile; "but for the lady's sake we will go in the morning."

"Well, yes; though, to tell the truth, I begin to feel annoyed with her now. But for her I should have got consent for an overdraft."

"Yes, it is a pity—a very great pity."

"She will be sorry when she knows,"

"No doubt she will."

"But she is a fine woman, nevertheless; a very fine woman—a splendid woman, in fact. You will go with me to see her in the morning?"

"Most certainly I will."

"She will be sorry when she discovers her mistake," and Hardman turned and walked out of the room.

Saville lay back in his chair and laughed when the door closed behind him. "I can still twist him round my thumb," he chuckled; "but the situation is a bit awkward, notwithstanding."

When Hardman awoke next morning he was surprised at the unusual stillness of the house. During the night the wind had been blowing half a gale, and the house had been full of noises—noises that jarred upon his nerves and drove him to his deadly narcotic for ease and sleep. But with the dawn the wind ceased, and he fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

When he opened his eyes it was well on into the forenoon, and yet nobody seemed stirring; for several minutes he lay still and listened, but not a sound could be heard, not a movement in the rooms below.

"Well, this is strange," he muttered. "They must all have overslept themselves this morning." And he reached out his hand and grasped the bell-rope that hung at the back of his head and gave it a vigorous pull.

A shrill jangling followed, and echoed from room to room, then died away into absolute silence. But no other sound followed, no door opened or shut, no footstep sounded on the stairs.

Hardman raised himself on his elbow and listened, then

grasped the rope again and gave it such a pull that every other bell in the house seemed to jingle in sympathy. But, as before, there was no response; in a few moments absolute stillness reigned once more.

Hardman grew alarmed; there seemed something uncanny about the silence. Had robbers broken into the house during the night and murdered all the other inmates? And he looked at the narrow mullioned windows and smiled. "No robber could get into this room at any rate," he chuckled; "these old mullioned windows may obstruct the light, but they are robber-proof."

And he jumped out of bed and went to the door and shot back the bolt, then tried to open it, while an expression of alarm escaped his lips. The door was locked on the outside. He was a prisoner in his own house. For several minutes he tugged and pulled with all his might; but the oaken doors of Priory Mere, with their heavy locks and hinges, were not the kind to yield before the strength of a single man. He might as well have tried to push down the wall.

With a heavy groan he crept back at length to bed, and pulling the clothes around him, he lay still and tried to think. But his brain was by no means clear; strong doses of opium were not conducive to mental activity. To think consecutively was almost an impossibility. Still, slowly but surely, the truth at length dawned upon him, and he ground his teeth in impotent rage and disappointment.

He saw now that all that Mary Vincent had told him respecting Saville was true. He was a rogue and swindler, and afraid of being arrested, he had gone off in the night and taken the servants, who were his confederates, with him, and had locked him in his room so that he might not be able to follow.

"What an awful fool I have been," he muttered, clenching his fists until his nails cut into the flesh, "not to have found him out before this. What could I expect of a man who did not acknowledge such a thing as moral obligation. Eric warned me, and his logic was irresistible, and yet, blind idiot that I was, I went on trusting him still! Gad, I deserve my fate!" and he turned over in bed and groaned.

"Now I can see," he went on at length, "why he was so anxious that I should quarrel with Eric, and why he

compelled me to dismiss Homer and Sarah. And but for the fact that Miss Vincent recognised him yesterday, he would have gone on swindling me till I had not a shilling left. Great Scott! was ever such an idiot as I am in the world before!"

And he hid his face in the bedclothes, as though ashamed to face the daylight.

By-and-by, questions as to his personal safety began to obtrude themselves. What if his worst fears were true? What if Saville and all the servants had gone and bolted the doors, was there any chance of escape for him?

And he sat up in bed and looked eagerly around him. There were two windows in the room, but the apertures between the stone mullions were so narrow that he knew he could not possibly drag himself through them, hence escape by the windows was impossible. The door was of solid oak, and he had already tried his strength in that direction. The chimney, though broad enough at the bottom, had but a very narrow aperture at the top, and so to think of escape by that means was simply madness. What then? He might open the windows and shout for help; but Priory Mere was so isolated and forsaken that he might call till Doomsday and none might hear him.

"Good heavens," he groaned, "I may stay here and freeze, and starve, and die by slow torture, with none to pity or help. And when I am discovered, half eaten, perhaps, by rats, who will care? Will any one shed a tear for me, or heave a sigh? Why should any one? I have lived alone in utter selfishness. I have helped no charity, befriended no forsaken one. My own nephew I have cast a beggar upon the world, my faithful old servants I have dismissed in disgrace, and now I have my reward." And he lay down again, and rolled himself in the bedclothes, for the day was bitterly cold.

But his thoughts would not let him lie still. The bare possibility of dying of cold and starvation in his own house made his flesh creep, and almost froze the blood in his veins. The thought of dying at all had always been like a nightmare to him, but to die alone and forsaken, without a friendly hand to lift his head or smooth his pillow, was too horrible to be contemplated. And yet he could not shake off the thought.

He got up at length and dressed himself, then opened the windows, and shouted for help, but no answering voice greeted his ears, no sign of life was visible on the wintry landscape.

As the short winter's day waned, and darkness began to creep on once more, his fears completely overcame him. There could be no doubt now that he had been robbed and forsaken, and left to die alone.

"But I will not die," he shrieked. "It is too horrible—too horrible," and he went and tugged at the door, and pounded it with his hands until the blood ran down his fingers, and dropped off their tips.

As the darkness deepened, his terror, if possible, increased. All his philosophic self-restraint left him entirely, and he lay on the floor and sobbed like a child. Such philosophy as he had boasted of might do to live with, but in the presence of the great angel of death it was no comfort at all. Ah, he had sneered at the Christian faith, had laughed Homer's creed to scorn, and spoken of Mr. Lane as an interesting old fossil; but in what lay the superiority of his philosophy now?

He recalled the day when the Major was buried, and he had watched the old Rector sitting in his bath-chair, with radiant face, reading the burial service. He was in the shadow of death then, and had been ever since, but he had evinced no terror or alarm. Day by day he had sat waiting for the approach of death as for the coming of a friend, and was still waiting in peace and hope.

"But there will be no hope in my death," he groaned. "Will they read that service over me, I wonder? I who have sneered at religion, and laughed their professions to scorn."

After awhile he crept into bed again, but not to sleep. At length his brain was clear, and memory was too active to let slumber approach. All his past life came up before him, as it had never done before; and, as he looked at it in the lurid light of what seemed his life's sunset, it appeared an utter failure and mistake. He had accomplished nothing, either for himself or others. He had dabbled in science and philosophy, neither of which had he understood. He had sneered at religion, while religious men were everywhere doing the world's work, building hospitals and

almshouses and refuges, fighting disease and oppression and crime, and striving with unflagging endeavour to make the world better, and to lift the human race to higher planes.

He would have shut out the memory of the past, if he could; but, though he tried again and again, he could not succeed. It seemed to him as if the story of every day of his life had been written in a book, and while memory turned the pages he was compelled to read.

Other people had done good, had fed the hungry and clothed the naked, and ministered to the suffering and sad and sinful; and had done this because they believed in Christ, and were inspired by His life.

But he had done nothing. Every page of his life's story was but a record of failure. Day after day, and year after year, the tale went on, and this was the end of it; and the end was of a piece with all the rest. What other end could he expect? What else did he deserve? He had befriended no one; now he was left without a friend. He was simply reaping what he had sown.

It was far on into the night when gentle sleep shut his eyelids, and touched his heart to peace, and for many hours he slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. But when the light of a new day stole into the room again the pangs of hunger woke him, and brought back once more all the horror of his situation.

Then he suddenly remembered that there was a supply of his favourite opiate in the room, and for the rest of the day he was oblivious to hunger and cold and fear. Under the influence of the deadening narcotic he lay upon his bed and smiled. The silence and loneliness of the house no longer appalled him, and death seemed no longer near him. In dreamy ease, not to say ecstasy, the hours passed on, and daylight faded into night once more.

Meanwhile, Saville and his confederates had got safe away from Priory Mere; in fact, the former had got safe out of England, and was already—under a new alias—seriously considering what his next move in life should be, while the coachman and his wife, and Mary the servant, in the great world of London, felt quite safe from detection, and were already negotiating for fresh situations.

They had got away from Priory Mere without any diffi-

culty. Yoking the two horses into the brougham, and piling on it as much luggage as they could carry, they drove away about three o'clock in the morning, keeping well on the grass, that the noise of wheels might not be heard, and, by nine o'clock, they found themselves in Manchester.

Their only difficulty was how to dispose of the horses and carriage, but, in the end, that proved a very simple matter. Just before the train started the coachman asked a lad to hold the horses for a few minutes, promising him sixpence for his trouble, and so the lad found himself at length with a carriage and pair on his hands; but the responsibility becoming too heavy, he took a policeman into his confidence, and that worthy, at once scenting a mystery, consulted a brother officer, who arrested the lad for having a pair of horses and a carriage in his possession that did not belong to him. So, getting hold of the wrong end of the coil, as is usual with policemen, they began, with much diligence, to work up a case against the lad; but, after an inquiry extending over several days, it was ascertained that the youth had never done any horse-stealing before, and that the probabilities were that he had not been guilty in the present case. Ultimately the lad was dismissed, the horses and carriage consigned to the care of the Watch Committee, and fresh inquiries instituted in other directions, with what results the sequel will show.

Homer getting uneasy—though for no particular reason, except that Hardman had still a warm place in his heart—went across to Priory Mere one day to have a “look round,” as he termed it, and great was his surprise to find the place deserted. All the blinds were down, and the doors shut, and, in going into the stable, he found the horses gone, while the brougham was missing from the coachhouse.

“Well, this is queer,” the old man said, scratching his head. “I can’t make it up, no road. I wonder if he has gone to London to do the swell. That Saville could persuade him to anything a’most.”

And he wended his way out into the garden, but he did not penetrate far into it. The sight of its neglected condition almost made him sick.

"Oh, dear," he groaned, "what is the poor old master a comin' to?" •

When he left the garden, he stood for a long time leaning against the gate, looking at the old house, and, more than once, he brushed away the tears that welled up into his eyes. He was very comfortable at Lindon Hall—in fact, he never had such easy times before in his life, while "Miss Claire," as he always called her, was the soul of kindness; and yet, for all that, he would rather be at Priory Mere, with smaller wages and more to do. Priory Mere was his home, and no other place could so fill his heart.

He turned away, at length, and retraced his steps towards Lindon Hall, little dreaming that his old master was lying forsaken in one of the rooms, perishing of cold and hunger and neglect.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT LAST!

Yet of his little he had some to spare,
To feed the famished, and to clothe the bare :
For mortified he was to that degree,
A poorer than himself he would not see.
“ True priests,” he said, “ and preachers of the Word,”
Were only stewards of their sovereign Lord ;
Nothing was theirs ; but all the public store
Intrusted riches, to relieve the poor.”

DRYDEN.

MARY VINCENT, having put Hardman on his guard against Saville, was curious to know what the upshot would be. She had no idea that he would be so simple-minded as to go straight home and tell the man all that she had said.

“ I fancy he only half believed me,” she said to Claire, after Hardman had left. “ He still has a feeling that I may be mistaken.”

“ And you are quite certain that you are not ? ”

“ Quite certain. Why, I have known him for twenty years—lived in the same house with him, seen him in all moods and in all disguises ; know every tone and modulation of his voice, and almost every expression of his face ! ”

“ And has he always been the same bad man that he is now ? ”

“ No, not always. When he married my sister we had no fault to find with him, except that he was extravagant. Then he took to doubtful methods of raising money, to gambling, and such like. But the story is too painful to pursue. In five years he had broken my sister’s heart. But before her death he had succeeded in swindling my father out of most of his savings, as well as getting himself into prison for forgery. Since then his life has been

one of low cunning and intrigue. He is clever, well-educated, and a brilliant conversationalist, when he likes; but he has prostituted all his gifts to unworthy ends. By turn he has been actor, journalist, newspaper correspondent, missionary, infidel lecturer, private tutor, schoolmaster, and I know not what. For the last two or three years we had heard nothing of him; hence, you may judge of my surprise when I saw him, yesterday, at Priory Mere."

"Perhaps he has turned over a new leaf, and is trying to do better," Claire suggested.

"I very much doubt it," was the grave reply. "Anyhow, I felt it my duty to put Mr. Hardman on his guard. Moreover, does it not strike you as strange, that all the changes at Priory Mere should have taken place since he came?"

"I know Homer and Sarah have not a very high opinion of him," Claire answered, uneasily.

"I only hope my warning has not come too late," was the reply. "Anyhow, I shall be curious to know the sequel."

"Oh, Mr. Hardman will be round first thing in the morning," Claire said, with a laugh. "You have quite captivated him."

"If Mr. Hardman does not call, I know who will," Mary said, with a sly twinkle of the eye.

"Who?"

• "Mr. Quayle."

Claire blushed, and was silent for a moment, then answered, "Yes, very likely he will. You see, he is very busy with his soup kitchen at present, and I am his principal supporter."

"Are you going to be his principal supporter always?" Mary asked, naively.

In a moment Claire grew pale, and clasped her hands nervously.

"Oh, Mary," she said, after a long pause, "I am in a strait. Providence seems to point in the direction you indicate, and Mr. Quayle is almost my ideal of what a Christian minister ought to be. He is so zealous, so self-sacrificing, so good to the poor, that for many things I should account it an honour to be the wife of so good a man; and yet, Mary——"

"And yet what, Claire?" she asked, after a pause.

"I don't think I love him as I ought to do. I admire him; I reverence him for his good deeds; I rejoice in the good work he is doing, and am proud to lend a helping hand; but ——"

"But you love another better?"

"Oh, Mary, is it that my heart is wicked that I love Eric so? I have tried to forget him, tried to tear his image out of my heart, but the effort has been in vain. Last night, in my dreams, I was sitting with him again on Rouser Height, my hand clasped in his."

"Perhaps, some day, your dream will come true."

"Oh, no, Mary, that is impossible! We talked it over before he went away, and said good-bye for ever. It is my cross, Mary, my lifelong penance. Continually I seem to hear a voice, saying, 'If any one will be my disciple let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.'"

"And you think this is your cross, do you?"

"What else can I think, Mary? Does it not seem to you that my way of duty is clear?"

"Duty is a question, Claire, we must decide for ourselves. For myself, I am unable yet to see that it is your duty to marry Mr. Quayle."

"He is very eager that I should consent."

"That may be. Men are often eager when their advantage is at stake."

"There, Mary, you wrong him. He is not a fortune-hunter. I believe that he loves me really and truly."

"Very likely; he would be a strange man that could not love you if he tried."

"Oh, Mary, how cynical you are!"

"Not in the least, my dear. I am only practical."

"What would you advise me, then?"

"Make up your mind what your duty is, and then do it."

"I think my mind is already made up on that question," Claire said, sadly. "But we will not talk any more on the subject now. Time will tell."

"Aye, time will tell," Mary answered playfully, and then the subject dropped.

On the following morning, as Mary had predicted, Mr. Quayle was early at the Hall. But he said nothing to Claire about either love or marriage. He seemed com-

pletely absorbed in his works of charity, and as Claire listened to his eager, earnest talk, her own enthusiasm burned with a fiercer glow. Mr. Quayle was not slow to discover that he got much nearer Claire's heart when he talked about his work than when he talked of love. In fact, Claire did not like his love-making; he seemed commonplace at such times; too much like the ordinary rank and file of men; but when he spoke of his work, of the sick he had visited and the poor he had succoured; when he unfolded to her his schemes of philanthropy, and spoke of the hopes that animated him respecting the future, then he seemed to stand upon a higher plane. He was no longer commonplace, he was a hero and a saint. At such times she felt that she was not worthy to be the wife of so good a man, that her proper place was to sit as a humble disciple at his feet.

She sometimes wondered that he was so much more zealous since her aunt's death than he had been before; but she was not likely to guess the secret of the change. He had hoped that he would be able to reason his conscience to sleep, but as time went on he found out his mistake. And so he tried to make atonement for his sin by increase of zeal. Nor let it be supposed that he was insincere. Had he been justly balanced, the good in him would have outweighed the evil. It was a genuine pleasure to him to do good to others—a joy to conduct the services of the church; and had he been less selfish, or had temptation come to him in a less insinuating form, his life might have been blameless to the end. But, then, is not that the case with us all? We are all good until temptation proves too much for us—all true and upright until we step over the border line. The odd thing about Mr. Quayle was that he never regretted for long together that he had wronged Eric Strome. The advantages were so great and so far-reaching, that he was prepared to endure an occasional pang of remorse in lieu thereof.

Mary Vincent could not quite make him up; for some things she liked him very much, but a way he had of averting his eyes when she looked him straight in the face made her sometimes a little doubtful of him. She was too concerned, however, at present, at the presence of Saville in the neighbourhood to trouble herself about the Curate.

And when three days had passed away, and Mr. Hardman still kept out of sight, she became decidedly uneasy.

"I wish I knew what that man was up to," she said, half aloud, as if speaking to herself.

"Who? Mr. Hardman?" Claire asked.

"No; William Coon, or Saville as he calls himself."

"Oh, I expect he's keeping quiet, and the philosopher is watching him," Claire said, with a laugh.

"I don't know. He saw clearly enough that I recognised him."

"But he will not know that you have told Mr. Hardman."

"He may have his suspicions, and that is what makes me anxious. He is a man that will stop at nothing."

"I don't think you need be troubled. Mr. Hardman knows how to look after himself. He may have some weaknesses and conceits, but he has a fund of common sense at the bottom."

"I do not doubt that for a moment," Mary said, with energy. "Indeed, I consider Mr. Hardman a very intelligent man."

Claire lifted her eyebrows for a moment, and Mary went on:

"What I fear is that Mr. Hardman may have discovered him in some villainy, and that he has done something desperate in order to escape."

"Oh, nonsense," said Claire; "he has his servants to protect him, even if he were unable to defend himself. But there goes the door bell; perhaps he has called, at length."

It was not Hardman, however. A few minutes later a servant announced that Mr. Quayle was waiting in the library to see Miss Leicester.

Claire blushed, straightened an ornament or two on the mantelpiece, then hurried away.

Mr. Quayle was deep in an easy chair before the fire when she entered, but he rose in a moment, looking pale and tired.

"I am sorry to trouble you so much," he said, with a wan smile, "but I do not know who else to turn to for help."

"Do not consider me, Mr. Quayle," she said. "But I do think you should consider yourself. You are looking quite ill; you are wearing yourself out with incessant work."

"I shall soon pick up again," he said, with a slight blush; "but just at present I have no time to think of myself."

"But if you break down altogether, what will become of your poor people then?"

"I know not," he answered, with a distant look in his eyes. "I must not think of that. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"Excuse me, Mr. Quayle," and there was a slight tremor of anxiety in her tones, "I do think you should consider yourself a little more than you are doing. It surely cannot be wise to risk all the future for the sake of doing an hour's extra work to-day."

"I quite appreciate the force of what you say," he answered, quietly. "But there come times in every man's life when he cannot halt—when he must go on; and surely he will be taken care of while he is doing his duty?"

"I do not quite see that," she answered, with averted eyes. "Our business is to take care of ourselves."

"Up to a certain point we may do so. Beyond that, we must leave the issue with a higher power. A man is immortal, it is said, until his work is done."

"A very pretty notion, no doubt," she answered; "but one, I fear, that will not bear investigation."

"Ah," and he looked up at her and smiled sadly. "Any way, I do not fear, and just at present I cannot think of resting. Out in the extreme portion of the parish I have unearthed to-day some fresh cases of fearful suffering and destitution. It is about these cases I have come to see you now."

For a moment she looked at him without speaking. His patient, unselfish devotion touched her heart to its very depths. Did she love him? Not in the sense that the word is generally understood, but what was, perhaps, much better, she revered him. He seemed to her at that moment like one of the saints of old.

"I will help you all I can," she said, at length, and then followed a long talk about the best methods of relieving the unusual destitution of the parish.

He rose at length to go, but notwithstanding the help Claire had promised him, there was still an anxious, troubled look in his eyes.

"I am sure you ought not to do any more work to-day," she said. "Stay and have dinner with us, and take a little rest."

"You are very kind," he answered, dreamily, and he leaned his elbow on the mantel-piece and looked abstractedly into the fire.

For awhile no other word was spoken. Claire watched him anxiously, touched to sympathy by his pale and careworn face. "I am sure something is troubling you," she said, at length. "Let me know if I can in any way help you."

"I am troubled," he said, still looking into the fire; "and yet I hesitate to tell you,"

"For what reason?" she asked.

"I would save you from pain, if possible," he went on; "and yet, perhaps, it is best I should speak out. Your name is so constantly coupled with mine that I think you ought to know."

She blushed deeply and bent her eyes on the ground, but made no attempt to speak.

"It is difficult for me to listen and say nothing," he went on; "more difficult to speak, for I know not what answer to make. You keep me in suspense, and so unwittingly add to my many burdens. You let me hope on, and give me no solid ground for hope. I dread to press the question, lest you should crush me utterly with a refusal; and yet this suspense is wearing me out."

She looked up at length, her eyes brim full of tears. "What would you have me do or say?" she faltered. "I honour and admire you very much, I even reverence you for your works' sake. But I do not love you as I think a woman ought to love the man she promises to marry. Would you be content to marry a woman that could not give you all her heart?"

"I love you enough for both," he said, impulsively; "but if there is some one else you hope to marry—"

"No, no!" she said, quickly; "there is no one else I should ever dream of marrying."

"Then cannot you give me a word of real hope?" he said. "We need not talk of marriage yet. I am willing to wait as long as you will; but if you would consent to a formal engagement it would make everything straight, and there would be no longer any impropriety in your name being coupled with mine."

"I acknowledge the force of what you say," she answered, "and yet——"

"And yet what?" and he came and took her hand in his. "Look into my face, Claire," he said. "You must feel that God meant you to be my wife. You are at one with me in my work. You could help me in a thousand ways. In what other sphere could you be so useful or so happy? Think of it, and do not fly in the face of Providence."

"I want to do what is right," she said, with downcast

"And I have no other wish," he said. "Did I not think it was God's will I could not press it."

"You believe it is God's will, do you?" she questions, with eager eyes.

"I more than believe," he said; "I am confident of it."

"Then I will hesitate no longer," she said. "I promise what you ask."

"My darling!" he gasped, and he bent over and kissed her forehead.

"Now, Heber, go and leave me for awhile," she said, "I need time to calm myself," and without a word, he quietly left the room and the house.

The wind was bitterly cold, but he did not heed it. His heart was throbbing tumultuously. At last, at last the prize was his! And as he looked exultantly across the wide expanse of frost-bound country, he tried to persuade himself that the end justified the means.

In the hall of the rectory he met Lucy—sweet, sad-eyed Lucy—and his heart smote him with sudden pain.

"Are you no better to-day?" he said, kindly.

"I am not ill, Mr. Quayle," she said, with a smile; "only a little languid."

"You will get your roses back again when summer comes," he said, cheerfully.

"Yes, when summer comes," she answered, dreamily, and she smiled again.

For a moment he looked at her with eager, hungry eyes, then passed on to his own room. All his exultation was at an end. One kiss of love from Lucy's lips would have been more precious to him than all the estates of Lindon; but he struggled bravely with the feeling, and after a while succeeded in banishing it.

"I have no time for sentiment," he said to himself. "Life is business, and very serious business, too."

The next week it was announced in all the Society papers that a marriage had been arranged between the Rev. Heber Quayle and Miss Leicester, of Lindon Hall.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE BITTER END.

“ Ah, world unknown ! how charming is thy view
Thy pleasures many, and each pleasure new !
Ah, world experienced ! what of thee is told ?
How few thy pleasures, and those few how old ? ”

CRABBE.

MEANWHILE Eric had discovered that his battle with the world had gone against him. He was not very confident at the first, but as the days went by, hope gradually died out of his heart, till, after nine months of pitiful struggling, he gave himself up to despair. His experience in Ribblesford was only a prophesy of what he encountered elsewhere. He tried to do his best, but his best was always so bad that no employer would tolerate him long, and so week by week he sank lower and lower, and all the while he drifted by slow and painful steps nearer London. He had a faint hope that in London something might turn up to his advantage ; that among so many people and amid so many industries, he might find some means of earning an honest living. But, alas ! by the time he reached the great city all his money was spent, his clothes were worn and stained and shabby, his boots down at the heels, his linen crumpled and by no means clean. In Oxford Street he caught a reflection of himself in a large mirror, and blushed to the roots of his hair. So changed was he in appearance that he could scarcely believe the testimony of his own eyes, and he turned back and looked at himself a second time, to make sure it was not the reflection of some other man he saw.

“ I fear I stand no chance,” he muttered to himself ;
“ to obtain a respectable berth a man must look respect-

able. And I look anything but that. In fact, I look so shabby that I could not trust myself," and he laughed bitterly and hurried on.

But notwithstanding this despairing mood, he made an earnest and manful attempt day after day to get employment, but always with the same result. Positions of trust, or even clerkships, were out of the question. He might write a good hand, might be able to keep accounts fairly, but he had had no training or experience; while a hundred men with good credentials—and he had none—were struggling for the same posts.

"I don't care what it is so long as I can get a start," he said to himself, as he tramped the weary and dusty streets. But there lay the difficulty. Constantly the same question faced him: "What could he do?"

He saw people setting bricks, and carrying mortar, and moving bales and boxes, and driving cabs and lorries, and paving streets and laying gas-pipes, and a hundred other things, and yet he was helpless. For the heavier work he hadn't strength, for the lighter work he hadn't skill.

When he had pawned everything he possessed of any value, like the prodigal of old, he began to be in want; but, unlike the prodigal, he could find no citizen that wanted a man even to feed swine. He tried to pawn Mr. Short's Testament, which he still carried with him; but no one would advance more than a penny on it, and he refused to let it go at that.

"These Christian people don't seem to set much value on the words of their Christ," he said, bitterly. "Well, well, it doesn't matter. I'll keep it to the end now for poor Short's sake."

Sometimes he was strongly tempted to steal, but somehow, when it came to the point, something always restrained him. In this matter he was a puzzle to himself. He had no religious scruples. He did not believe in the doctrine of human accountability. Right and wrong, his uncle had assured him, were only relative terms, and yet he could not bring himself to theft.

"Am I a coward?" he said to himself one day, "or am I afraid of prison? Nay, a prison is better than destitution in the streets. Is it the disgrace, then, I fear? Surely

not. No one knows me here or cares for me. I am only a unit in the crowd, and when I am gone, crushed, trampled under feet, dead and buried, no one will miss me. And what is disgrace to an unknown man? The disgrace would not be mine, but the world's."

But all the while, that inward voice, which he could not understand or account for, held him in check, and day after day he suffered hunger, but he would not steal.

At length, however, the pinch of want became unendurable, and he was about to throw himself under the wheels of a passing lorry, when he felt a touch on his arm, and, turning quickly, he encountered the steady gaze of a ragged, shock-headed lad, who was munching greedily a small loaf of bread.

"You look hunger'd," said the lad; "'ave a bite?"

"Thank you very much," said Eric, and the tears filled his eyes in a moment, for he was weak with long fasting.

Instantly the lad tore the loaf in sunder, and gave Eric the bigger half.

"You are very good," Eric said; "perhaps some day I may do as much for you."

The boy laughed broadly. "Let's go down this hentry," he said. "I know a doorstep where we can sit down and be quiet."

Eric gladly followed, and a few minutes later they were sitting side by side, eagerly munching the dry but wholesome crust.

"What's your name?" Eric said, at length, looking down into the lad's bright and honest eyes.

"Jack Martin; wot's yourn?"

"Eric Strome. Do you live near here?"

"No; I live at No. 4, Fiddler's-rents, Whitechapel."

"What do you do?"

"Oh, most things. Yer see I'm purty handy now, and can turn a penny in lots o' ways."

"I wish I could," Eric said, ruefully.

"I knowd yer wer down in the chops directly I clapped heyес on yer, an' yet you talk like a gent; 'ave yer been in quod?"

"Ngt yet."

"'Thought yer 'ad, likely."

"Why?"

"Cause as 'ow gents as has been eddicated, an' all that, oughtn't ter be 'ard up if they lives square."

"That is true; but I've been unfortunate. I was never taught how to earn my living."

"That's sad; but I'll teach yer. You come with me."

"Why do you want to teach me?"

"For same reason as I offered you a bite."

"And why did you do that?"

"'Cause I wanted to be kind to yer."

"And why do you want to be kind?"

"'Cause it's right; 'cause as 'ow we're told to be; 'cause the good Lord is pleased for us to be friendly."

"Did you learn that in church?"

"Ay, an' in school. Golden Text las' Sunday was, 'Inasmuch as ye 'ave done it unto one o' these ye 'ave done it unto Me.'"

Eric was silent. Here at last was an exhibition of practical Christianity that touched him to the heart and brought the tears to his eyes.

That night Eric shared Jack Martin's room in Fiddler's Rents, and the next day Jack put him in the way of earning sixpence, and showed him also how he could lay it out to the best advantage. This was the beginning of slightly better days. Jack remained a staunch and loyal friend, always ready to share his earnings with Eric if the latter had been unfortunate.

And yet to Eric such a life was all but intolerable. Jack was happy enough; he had never known anything better, and as long as he had a penny to spare he was content.

"You keep yer pecker hup," he would say to Eric. "I think we be a doin' famously."

But Eric could not see it in that light.* Life to him was a cruel burden, a bitter heartache, unrelieved by a single ray of hope.

In those days his heart was very bitter against his uncle, not merely for casting him adrift upon the world, but for educating him in the way he had done.

"There may be no God," he said to himself one day,

"and there may be no hereafter. But there is no denying that this Christianity unites men in a kind of brotherhood which is very helpful to them in this life. If I had been brought up like other people, to believe in religion, I should not have been the friendless, helpless orphan I now find myself. In churches and Christian associations I might have found friends and sympathy and help. Now I stand outside. I cannot go and profess what I do not believe or understand. I cannot be a hypocrite. And so I am orphaned, forsaken, friendless. Life has no hope for me here or hereafter."

Then he pulled Mr. Short's Testament out of his pocket, and commenced at the beginning to read it. "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

"And Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; and Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram——"

"I reckon I shall never fulfil my promise to Mr. Short," he said, closing the book. "It doesn't interest me, somehow. I fancy I can't be like other people," and he put the little Testament back into his pocket once more.

As winter came on his misery steadily increased. Such work as he was able to do got daily more scarce, or else there were more people eager to do it than in the summer time; and sometimes for days on the stretch he did not earn enough to keep body and soul together, and but for the kindness of Jack he would have starved.

In those days he did his best not to think of the past. The memory of Priory Mere and Claire almost drove him mad. He was very thankful that none of his home friends knew of his failure. He wondered what Claire would think if she knew; wondered if she ever thought of him at all. Ah! his uncle was right when he said that hope was a cheat. He had hoped to be Lord of Lindon and the husband of Claire, as well as the owner of Priory Mere. What a contrast between his hopes and the reality!

And he would clench his fists and try to forget that he had ever been any other than what he then was. Yet, in spite of himself, the memory of the past would come back to him and he would find himself in fancy sitting on the

rocks on Routor Heights, with Claire's hand clasped in his, and her rippling laughter making music in his heart.

How he managed to struggle through so much of that terrible winter he never knew. But one bitterly cold day in January he felt that he had reached the end. He had held on as long as a ray of hope remained in his heart; when that went out in darkness life had nothing left to offer, and he resolved to slip quietly out of time into the great darkness and silence that lay beyond. He felt ashamed to depend any longer on the charity of Jack Martin. Already he had taken again and again what the boy could ill spare, and the thought of still trespassing on his kindness was intolerable. He had hoped that he might be able to repay the boy's kindness in some form or other, and on the face of it it looked cowardly to slip out of life and so escape payment of his debts. But, on the other hand, if he lived he saw no chance of bettering his position.

"I shall only get further and further into debt if I stay," he said, bitterly. "And what is there to live for? Is hunger so sweet, is destitution so pleasant, that I am grieved to part company with them? Suppose I struggle on for forty years in London slums; suppose I earn enough to keep my head above water--what then? Shall I have gained anything by the struggle? I must die some time, and will dying be easier when I am old than now while I am young? If life had any hope, any pleasure, any gleam of sunshine, I might tolerate it for awhile. But to live merely for the sake of living, to exist simply to suffer, is not philosophic, to say the least. I have struggled on month after month cherishing a nameless hope—a hope so dim and vague that I could not shape it into words, yet there it has been, like faint star-light in the darkness, but that has gone now." And he pulled a piece of newspaper from his pocket, and read for the fiftieth time a short paragraph that had arrested his attention on the previous night:—

"A marriage has been arranged between the Rev. Heber Quayle and Miss Leicester, of Lindon Hall."

"Ah, well," he said, "flinging the paper impatiently from him. "I suppose they are both happy now. For myself, the pleasant dream is at an end, and now to sleep."

And he got up and staggered towards the door, but paused suddenly, when half-way across the room.

"I must let Jack know," he muttered, "or he will get anxious about me, and he has been so kind that I would not like him to suffer on my account; but how is it to be done?"

And he began to search the room for a piece of paper on which he could scribble a few lines. He found at length what would answer his purpose; but then a new difficulty arose. What should he say? He could not tell the truth, he did not like writing a falsehood; and for a long time he sat nibbling the end of his pencil, trying to think out some form of words that would explain his absence to Jack without awaking any suspicion of the truth. At length he began:—

"My dear Jack,—Don't expect me again until you see me. I'm off to-day on a new track; the chances are I shall go to sea, as my inclinations lie in that direction."

And he paused and shuddered a little; the thought of being carried out by the turbid river and lodged in the great ocean, to be rocked and tossed by wave and storm till all his bones were dust, was too gruesome to be contemplated with any degree of serenity. But, shutting his teeth firmly, he went on again.

"To loaf about here any longer doing nothing is out of the question. My great regret is that I have not been able in any way to repay you for your kindness; but don't think I am ungrateful. As long as I can remember anything I shall remember your goodness to me. If I saw any prospect of doing anything here I would stay; but I don't. So good-bye, Jack, and believe me yours very gratefully,

"E. S."

"There," he said, pinning the note to the rickety table; "that will set the boy's mind at rest. Likely enough he will be glad to get rid of me, for I have only been a burden to him."

And he laughed bitterly, and made again for the door. "It has been my fate to be nothing but a burden to people all my life," he went on; "however, that is at an end now."

In a little while I shall be out of the reach of hunger and cold and nakedness. I wonder if uncle will ever get to know; and if he does, I wonder if he will care? It must be a great disappointment to him that his educational experiment has turned out such a sorry failure. If I am the fruit of philosophy, it must be an evil tree that bears such a wretched crop." And he stood with his hand on the door-latch and looked round the room once more. It was a wretched tenement, but it had sheltered him during many a bitter night, and he felt loth to leave it for ever.

This clinging to life merely for the sake of existence seemed a strange puzzle to him. With respect to the future he had no misgivings. His uncle's pessimism had rooted itself deeply in his own heart. Death was the end. That summed up his creed.

"As I had no existence ere I began to breathe," he said to himself, "so I shall have no existence when I cease to breathe. The world will go on as before, and I shall be forgotten."

And he opened the door and plunged into the wintry streets. He had now but one object in view, and that to hide in the river as quickly as possible.

No thought of a kindly Providence, of a Father's guiding hand, illumined for a moment the darkness of his despair. No prayer for help escaped his lips. In the crowded streets he was alone and forsaken. Not one ray of hope shed itself across his lonely path or held him back from doom.

Wrapping his tattered jacket round him, he loitered through the streets till the darkness fell, and then he sought the river's brink. He had resolved not to take a header over any of the bridges, for that would attract attention. But from one of the landing stages he imagined he would be able to slip quietly underneath the dark coverlet of water without attracting the notice of any one. Once let the river close above him, and then eternal peace.

Let no one blame him over much. He had no faith to make him brave or strong, no hope to hold him like an anchor while billows of anguish swept over his heart. Agnosticism may be a high-sounding word, but in the stress and storm of life it is but a broken staff, that pierces the hand that leans upon it. Alas! for the young man reared

in its dark and baneful shadow ; better almost he had never been born !

No one attempted to hinder Eric from carrying out his purpose, for no one guessed what was in his heart. Watching his opportunity, he slipped quietly down into the darkness. With only the faintest splash the river opened her cold arms to receive him, then silently closed them, and the black torrent swept on as before.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LEARNING BY EXPERIENCE.

"How strange appear the words of all!
The looks of those that live appal.
They are the ghosts, and check the breath;
There's no reality but death,
And hunger for some signal given
That we shall have our own in heaven.
But this the God of love lets be
A horrible uncertainty."

COVENTRY PATMORE.

HOMER was so troubled on his return from Priory Mere that he could not rest anywhere.

"I am fair boggled," he said to his wife; "I be for sure. I have a feelin' as though summat was wrong; the owd place looked so desarted an' lonesome. All the blinds were down, an' no smoke was comin' out o' none o' the chimbleys, that really it made me feel queer and creepy."

"Thou'rt an awful doubter, Homer," Sarah said, cheerfully. "I never did see sich a man for goin' haaf way to meet trouble. What's the use o' always worritin' about other people's affairs?"

"I caan't 'elp it, Sarah; an' look you here: I'm off down to Priory Mere fust thing i' t' mornin', an' I'm goin' 'to look round general."

"I think thou'd better mind thiy own business at home," Sarah answered.

"Nay, lass," was the reply; "I'd go to-night ef it wern't so dark, an' I felt so creepy. But in the mornin' I go, and thou must go with me."

"I shall do now't o' the sort," she answered.

"Yes, thou wilt, Sarah. It's no use settin' thy back up, for I mean it."

Sarah laughed a bit scornfully, then answered: "Very

good, Homer ; if thou art afraid, I'll go an' take care of thee."

During that night Homer scarcely got a wink of sleep. Battalions of nameless fears oppressed him, and would not be driven away, and, with the first glimmer of dawn, he and Sarah started for Priory Mere.

"It looks awful lonesome," Sarah said, as they turned the bend in the drive, and came in sight of the house. "It didn't used to look so, did it, Homer?"

"I don't think so," he said, buttoning his coat tightly round him. "I used to make it look as well as I could ; but it's winter, Sarah, an' scarcely daylight yet. It always looks best i' t' summer-time."

"Ay! when Eric was a lad, and Miss Claire used to come laughing round the corners ; it were in its best days then."

"Ay, lass, those were grand times ; but they're all gone, like many other good things, an'll never come back again."

"That's so," she said, with a sigh. "I wonder where the poor lad is ? If I could only see his bonny face once more, I could die content."

"Out, lass ! don't talk about dying," Homer said, reproachfully ; "we've got to live an' do a lot more work yet. Who knows ? we may get back to the owd place again afore we've done."

"We're better off where we are," she said.

• "That may be," was the reply ; "but it mayn't always be as good as it is now. If Miss Claire marries the Curate it'll make a lot o' difference. He don't like Dissenters, as thou knows, Sarah. And if he gets to be master he'll make it hot for us."

"I hope an' pray he'll never marry her," Sarah said, with energy. "She's a heap too good for him every road. Why, he ain't fit to be mentioned in the same day with her!"

"Ay, she's beautifuller than a flower, an' gooder, too," Homer said, with a sigh. "I don't know but one as is desarvin' of her, an' he, poor lad, is far away—dead, perhaps ; who knows ? But here we be, Sarah ; bless my soul, how silent an' lonesome the owd place is."

"Try the door, an' see if it's locked," Sarah said, in a whisper.

Instantly Homer obeyed, and the door yielded with scarcely a touch, revealing the dark and deserted hall.

Sarah drew back with a little shudder, and Homer, dropping the door-handle, came close to her side.

"I don't like the look o' things," he whispered, hoarsely; "dost think we'd better go in, Sarah?"

"Ay," she said; "we mustn't be cowards. What's there to be afraid of?"

"Dost thou mind goin' fust?" Homer said, hesitatingly.

"An' thou a man?" she said.

Homer's teeth chattered a little, then he answered: "We'd better go together, p'r'aps. You take hold o' my arm, Sarah. I feel dreadfully shaky, somehow."

"Ay, thou hast the courage of a snail," she answered; "but let us waste no more time, or thou'lt make me as bad as thyself," and, grasping his arm, they strode together into the silent and deserted hall.

"How it echoes," Sarah whispered, tightening her hand upon his arm. "Now give a shout, Homer, an' see if anybody answers."

"Hullo! anybody at home?" Homer called, making a desperate effort to be brave, and for a moment the echoes of his voice sounded dismally through the deserted house; then a faint moan came from one of the upstairs rooms.

"Hist!" said Sarah, trembling from head to foot. "What is that?"

"Is anybody here?" Homer called again, with chattering teeth.

And a moment later came the faint response, "Help! help!"

"Lord, it's the master!" Homer said, and tore up the stairs, three steps at a time. A moment later, he was at Hardman's door, and, finding the key in the lock, he turned it quickly, and entered. Hardman was still in bed, but so haggard and shrunken that Homer scarcely recognised him.

"Is that you, Homer?" Hardman said, feebly. "Oh, I am so glad; I thought you would never come," and his voice ended in a sob.

"My dear old master," Homer said, brushing his hands swiftly across his eyes. "What is the matter? What is the meaning of it?"

But Hardman was too overcome to reply; hiding his head in the bed-clothes, he sobbed hysterically. He had taken his last dose of opium the previous night, and its effects having worn away, his mind was now quite clear. What he had suffered during those four days and nights no one knew, or ever could know; another day or two of such physical and mental suffering would have killed him outright.

By the time he had recovered himself a little, Sarah was standing by Homer's side. Looking up, he caught her homely face beaming upon him, and his eyes filled again.

"Oh, Sarah—oh, Homer," he faltered. "My dear, good friends, why did I ever part with you?"

"That's more than I could ever make out," Sarah answered, blowing her nose violently. "But where be all the others?"

"I know not," he said. "They have robbed me, and forsaken me."

"Then, master, you shall never be forsaken again," Sarah said, impulsively.

"Not forsaken again?" he questioned, with a bewildered look in his eyes. "How? Why?"

"How, why? Because Homer an' I have come back again; that's how and why."

"But not to stay?"

"Ay, to stay, if you'll have us."

"Have you? But, no! I fear I'm a ruined man. I fear I could not pay you your wages."

"Don't say nothin' about wages, master," broke in Homer. "Sarah an' I'll be glad to stay without wages—won't we, Sarah?"

"Ay, an' we're goin' to stay, too, unless we're turned out," Sarah answered, quickly.

"And after the manner I've treated you?" Hardman said, wiping his eyes in the bedclothes. "Oh, no, you are too good; I don't deserve it."

"We don't any on us desearve all the good things we get," Homer replied; "but the Lord is very merciful."

"But I treated you shamefully," said Hardman.

"I know it," said Homer, with charming candour; "but that ain't no reason why we should treat you the same. No, no, master; let bygones be bygones. There ain't no

place so much like home to us as Priory Mere, an' here we'll stay, if you'll 'ave us."

"Now, Homer, cease thy chatter, an' get up some fuel, an' light a fire," Sarah chimed in at this point. "An I'll go down into the kitchen an' get some food ready. We are forgettin' that the master is clemmed"; and a few minutes later the room echoed once more to busy feet, and responded to the warmth of roaring fires.

Hardman tried to get out of bed, but failed in the attempt, nor did he leave his bed again for many a long day after.

After breakfast Claire and Mary Vincent came in search of Homer and Sarah, much wondering what could have detained them so long.

They found them, as Sarah expressed it, "up to their eyes in dirt."

"Look here, Miss Claire," said Sarah, "you'll 'ave to get somebody else to take our place. We can't leave the master to die. He says as 'ow he's ruined, and can't afford to pay no servants. So Homer and me is goin' to stop an' take care of him."

"As you will, Sarah," Claire answered, with a smile. "I will not put any obstacle in the way of what seems your duty, though I shall be very sorry to lose you."

"Don't think Homer'n me's ungrateful," said Sarah, wiping her eyes. "I don't think we's that, Miss Claire. You've been very good to us, an' we shall never forget it; but the poor master's all alone. Oh, dear, it made my heart ache to see 'im. They locked him into his room, and left him to starve."

"What a shame," said Mary Vincent, under her breath.

"Shame?" said Sarah, looking up indignantly. "Shame's not the word for it. But, excuse me, I'll have to be busy, if the master is not to perish outright."

"Let me help you," said Mary, pulling off her gloves. Then, turning to Claire, she said, "I'm going to stay here while I can be of any use."

She did not think at the time that her visit to Priory Mere would extend over two months, and yet such was the case. The shock to Hardman's system was far greater than had been at first supposed; and, instead of getting better, he grew daily worse. And when, at length,

a doctor was called in, he looked serious, and said he wished he had been sent for earlier.

Hardman saw the look upon his face, and knew, only too well, what it meant. At last he stood upon the shore of that strange country which all his life he had dreaded so much. At last he had come face to face with death. Had he been strong enough he would have cried out with fear, but he was almost too weak to moan. He could only lie still and wait, while a great horror stole over him, and almost stopped the beating of his heart.

With eyes that had grown large and pathetic, he followed Sarah and Mary as they moved to and fro in the room, but he rarely attempted to speak to them, yet none knew what a comfort their presence was. He felt that he could die more bravely if these Christian people were near him, and would hold his hands in the last struggle.

For a whole week his life trembled in the balance. A week that seemed a year to him. Hour by hour he watched the hand of the clock slowly—oh! so slowly—travelling round the dial, and when each hour struck he wondered if it was the last. Though too weak to talk, his brain was more than usually active, while his memory had been cleared of every shadow. In those long and solemn days and nights all the past of his life came up before him: all that he had done, and all that he had failed to do. He would have shut out the vision had he been able. In the red glare of the sunset his life looked so narrow, so paltry, so mean. How hateful his little deceits and hypocrisies seemed to him now; how childish his vanities and conceits! He had prided himself on being different from other men; had been vain of his shallow, scientific attainments; had boasted of his heresies and agnosticism. And now the testing time had come, and he discovered that he had been building on wood, hay, and stubble.

One night, as he lay with closed eyes, he heard what sounded like a sob, and, turning his head slightly, he saw Homer—whose turn it was to watch by him—kneeling by a chair, with hands clasped, and face uplifted, evidently engaged in prayer. At one time he would have sneered at the old man; but to-night, with that mysterious shadow brooding over him, the sight woke in his heart a throb of hope and pleasure.

Straining his ears, he caught a whisper of the prayer.

"Oh, Lord, bless master. If it be Thy will spare him to us. But if it be Thy will that he should die, show him Thy face and comfort his heart with Thy love before he goes. Light up the valley for him, Lord. He has not acknowledged Thee, because he has never known Thee. Let him know Thee now. Let Thy angels sing for him while the shadows fall. He is in the darkness, and all alone. Oh, Friend of Sinners, give him light and hold his hand while Jordan swells around his feet, and bring him safe——"

Then the old man's voice died away in a whisper so faint that Hardman could hear no more.

A few minutes later, when Homer stood by his bedside, he seemed fast asleep, but on his cheeks were two tears, which puzzled the old man greatly.

So the weary days and nights passed on, until the tide began to turn, and health and strength rolled back once more. A week later Hardman felt it a joy to live. When Mary Vincent could spare the time, she sat by his bedside and read to him, and sometimes Claire came over and kept him company; and from the village kindly Christian souls came to inquire after him, or sent good wishes for his recovery; and on every hand there were evidences of sympathy, and love, and kindly feeling. Hardman felt that he was only just beginning to know his friends, and that people generally were better than he had taken them to be. He had sneered at Christian people in the days gone by. Now he felt that he owed his life to them. What would he have done, but for Homer and Sarah and Mary Vincent?

As he recovered his strength he was left more and more alone, but books were placed within his reach, and among the rest he found Mary Vincent's Bible. Perhaps the fact that her name was on the fly-leaf induced him to read it again. Perhaps other influences operated in that direction. Anyhow he read through the New Testament from beginning to end—read it, not in a flippant or captious spirit, but with an earnest desire to know the truth and understand its meaning.

He said nothing, however, to any one of what he thought or felt, nor did any one question him. Mary Vincent talked with him on many subjects, and read to him out of many books, but the question of religion was not touched upon.

"He is in the hands of God," was her thought, "and God will lead him."

So the days passed on and grew into weeks, and once more he got down stairs, and moved with slow and faltering steps from room to room, and as Sarah and Homer watched him, they wondered at the change that had come over him. They expected he would fret and chafe over his losses, and curse Saville for his treachery, and curse himself for his folly in trusting him. Instead of which, he scarcely alluded to the matter, and when he did so, he only remarked that it might have been worse, and that in the end good might come out of it, and not evil.

Homer stared at him in blank astonishment, but discreetly said nothing; but a few minutes later he startled Sarah by saying, "Look you here, I'm a gettin' to feel a bit queer about the master. I be for sure."

"Why, what's the matter now?" said Sarah, anxiously.

"Well, either he ain't agoin' to get properly well no more, or else——"

"Or what else?"

"Well, I don't know," said Homer, scratching his head, and looking puzzled.

"Well, if thou doesn't know, why dost thou come here moiderin' me?"

"Well, dost thou know?" said Homer.

"Ay, to be sure," said Sarah. "He's a gettin' into the right road at last. Durin' the last two months the Lord has been openin' his eyes, an' showin' him his whereabouts. Affliction and sufferin' an' the sight o' death work wonders sometimes."

"I believe they do," said Homer, walking slowly away. "Perhaps he'll get into liberty at last."

It was well on into April before the Doctor allowed him to get out of doors, and the first visit he paid was to the rectory. He had heard of the shadow that was hanging over the Rector's household, and was anxious to express his sympathy.

Lucy had been drooping for many months, but since January, when it was publicly announced that Mr. Quayle was engaged to Claire Leicester, all desire for recovery had died out of her heart, and she was now but too surely passing out of life.

Hardman walked to the rectory, leaning on Homer's arm. He smiled pathetically as he passed the empty stable and coach-house, but he did not speak.

"I wish we could have kept one of the horses and the victoria," said Homer, noticing his glance. "It would ha' been nice for'e to get about in."

"Perhaps it's better as it is," he answered. "'Let me see; we did reward the policemen for tracing the horses to Manchester and getting them back again, didn't we?"

"Yes, they got a sovereign each," said Homer. "And well paid, I take it, they were for the job."

"They were put to a good deal of trouble, I understand," said Hardman. "I don't think they were overpaid. And, you see, we might have lost them altogether."

"Ay, just so; an' they did fetch a goodish price."

"Yes, yes, we must not complain," and Hardman paused a moment to regain his breath, while he cast a swift glance round him over the smiling landscape, just freshening in the beauty of spring time. High overhead a throstle was whistling in glad abandonment; before him was a bank yellow with primroses, and in the shadow of the plantation the blue-bells drooped in rich profusion.

"It looks very beautiful in the spring time, Homer," he said, gently, and he raised his hat, that his temples might greet the throbbing south wind that moved slowly past.

"Ay, it's wonderful purty," Homer said, and then they walked on again. Out into the broad highway flooded with sunshine; past the churchyard, where the dead slept in peace; underneath the tall elms in which the throstles sang; into the village with its slowly moving life. Then the picture changed, and they passed from the sunshine into the shadow, and from the presence of beautiful life into the hush that heralded the angel of death.

CHAPTER XL.

LOVE AND DEATH.

"I loved you, Evelyn, all the while.

My heart seemed full as it could hold.

There was place and to spare for the frank young smile,
And the red young mouth, and the hair's young gold.

So hush! I will give you this leaf to keep—

See, I shut it inside the sweet, cold hand!

There, that is our secret. Go to sleep.

You will wake, and remember, and understand."

BROWNING (*Evelyn Hope*).

THE old Rector looked up in surprise when Hardman entered. "This is an unexpected pleasure," he said, stretching out his hand. "I really did not know you were able to get out, and even had I known——"

"You would not have expected to see me here," Hardman interposed, jocularly.

"That is true," said the Rector, with a smile. "But perhaps on that account the pleasure is all the greater. Let me congratulate you on your recovery."

"Thank you, you are very kind," said Hardman, lightly. "Everybody has been kind, in fact. I did not know that I had so many friends before, or that there were so many people in Lindon that cared whether I lived or died. It's been a kind of revelation to me—it has, indeed. I don't know when anything has touched me so much; for when I come to think of it, I don't know that I have ever done anything to make people care for me, and yet everybody has such good wishes for my recovery. And when a man, Rector, has been having a long and stubborn fight with death, and is just returning from the conflict, worn and weak, and spent, a little sympathy goes a long way. I did not think so at one time, but I did not know then, I can tell you I have felt it very much. And it's just that

that has brought me across here to-day. You've been ill a long time, Rector, a very long time. I've thought about you while I've lain ill, and I've thought about Miss Lucy. I hope she is getting better, Rector. It's a sorry time for you, and I sympathise with you very much."

He had talked on rapidly, and with an affected lightness of manner, as though anxious to get off his mind what he had come to say.

The Rector listened, open-mouthed, and with a look of bewilderment in his eyes. Was this the cynic of Priory Mere—the man who pretended to have risen above the ordinary weaknesses of human kind? Was this the cold and unresponsive recluse, who all his life had lived apart from his fellows? The change was so great that he was unable to realise it for a moment. Then suddenly the truth flashed across his mind. Sickness and suffering and loss had accomplished what all his (the Rector's) arguments had failed to do. Since last they met, the man had stood face to face with death, had looked with strained eyes into that far country 'from whence no traveller e'er returns,' had felt the awful mystery of dissolution, had gazed at his past life through the lurid glare of sunset, and this was the result. He had come back again to walk the ways of men, but he could never forget what he had felt and seen.

"God is leading him," the Rector said to himself, "and I will not interfere."

For several moments after Hardman had ceased speaking there was silence in the room. Mr. Lane was visibly affected, and more than once brushed his hand quickly across his eyes.

"My little Lucy is no better," he faltered, at length. "No better, Mr. Hardman. I keep hoping and praying, but all the while, like a flower nipped by an unkindly wind, she droops and droops. I fear sometimes she will not be much longer with us."

"Oh, nonsense, Mr. Lane. Summer is coming, and she has youth on her side. See what I've pulled through, and I am getting an old man."

"Yes, I think of all that, and I keep hoping on. And yet at other times I am willing to let her go, for I know I shall soon follow. I've been lingering on the river's brink

for years now, Mr. Hardman; and if she goes first, she'll be there to welcome me."

"Oh, you'll neither of you go just yet," said Hardman, airily. "You see if I am not a true prophet."

"Would you like to see Lucy," the Rector said, after a pause. "She's in the drawing-room; she gets down a little every day, and I'm sure she'll be pleased to see you."

"Thank you, I should like to see her very much," Hardman said. And a minute later a servant came and led the way.

Lucy was reclining on a sofa, propped up with cushions. Underneath her head was a broad white pillow, over which streamed her wealth of unbound hair, encircling her pale and suffering face in a rich red nimbus of exceeding beauty. To Hardman she looked like a picture of one of the saints he had seen somewhere in his travels abroad.

She smiled gratefully when he came up to her side, and held out her white and wasted hand, which he took and held for a moment, noticing how large and blue the veins looked underneath the almost transparent skin.

"I'm sorry to see you so poorly, Miss Lucy," he said, cheerfully. "But summer is coming, and you will soon be all right when you are able to get out of doors again."

"I'm all right now, Mr. Hardman," she said, quietly, a bright smile lighting up her face while she spoke.

"All right?" he questioned.

- "Yes, all right. Day by day I'm getting nearer home, and very soon I shall be with God."

"But you will get better," he said, uneasily.

"Yes, I shall get better, but not in this world. Up there, where the skies are always blue, and sickness can come no more, I shall be well and strong for ever."

"But you would like to get better here?" he questioned.

"Not now," she said, dreamily. "Once I might have wished differently, but not now."

"And have you no fear?" he asked.

"Fear, Mr. Hardman?" and her great blue eyes opened to their fullest extent. "What have I to fear? Christ is with me, and He has promised to lead me home. No, no! I cannot fear while He is with me."

"I do not quite understand it," he said, reflectively. "I was very anxious to get better when I was so ill."

"And were you afraid to die?" she questioned.

"Ah—well—yes—I may as well confess it, Miss Lucy; I was afraid, and for that matter I am afraid still."

"But you do not know Christ," she said, innocently. "Some day you will know him, and then all fear will go away."

"You think so?" he questioned, with a smile.

For a moment she looked him steadily in the eyes, then answered, "Yes, I think so, Mr. Hardman, and up yonder we shall meet again."

He did not reply, but her words kept echoing through his memory as he walked homeward through the spring sunshine leaning on Homer's arm, nor could he forget them, try as he would.

On arriving at Priory Mere he discovered that Mary Vincent had taken her departure during his absence.

"I think you can do without me, Sarah," she said. "Your master is almost well again, and I should be in the way if I were to stay longer."

"He'll miss you dreadfully," Sarah answered, quietly; "for Homer'n me are no company for him."

"Oh, no, he'll be all right," was the smiling answer. "He has his books and fossils, you know, and they are sufficient company for him."

"Don't know 'bout that," said Sarah. "He ain't the same as he used to be. But you've been very kind, miss, an' I'm sure he'll never forget it."

So Mary went back again to Lindon Hall, and Hardman found Priory Mere inexpressibly silent and lonely. Fortunately for him he had plenty to occupy his time and thoughts. Saville had left his affairs in such a tangle, that he foresaw many a long week of hard work before they could be straightened out again. What the end would be he did not care, just yet, to inquire. He knew he would be greatly reduced in circumstances, but to what extent Saville had robbed him could not be ascertained in a day, and he put off the evil day as long as he could.

But the strange thing was he did not greatly trouble about the matter. Though he had given up posing as a philosopher, he displayed a more philosophic temper than he had ever been known to do before in his life. Instead of cursing his luck and declaring the world to be idiotic

and topsy-turvy, he kept saying to himself, "Ah, well, things might have been worse." He could not help thinking of the time when he lay so long in the shadow of death, and how he had thought then, if he could only live, he would not trouble about the loss of wealth. And now he was nearly well again, and life was so sweet, that he felt he had no right to complain. Moreover, his painful experience had taught him many things. He had overheard Homer informing Sarah "That he believed the master's troubles had been sent of God to lead him out of darkness and bondage into light and liberty," and Sarah had assented to the proposition. Was there any truth in it? he wondered. At one time he would have scorned to entertain the thought for a moment, but of late a change had come over him. He had been face to face with death, and life and the world could never seem the same again. Then, by an easy transition, his thoughts would stray away to Mary Vincent. In large measure he owed his life to her. The doctor had said again and again, that but for good nursing he would not have pulled through. In his eyes she was the most beautiful woman on earth; and she was a *Christian*. So almost unconsciously the leaven of truth was working in his heart, and bringing the freedom that truth alone can bring.

As his strength increased he extended his excursions farther into the village, and at length he got as far as Lindon Hall. Mary Vincent had been expecting him for days before he came. He could never be a stranger to her any more. She had helped to bring him back to life again, and so she felt, in a vague, undefined way, as though in some measure he belonged to her. The welcome he received from both Claire and Mary was all that his heart could desire, and after that he went nearly every day.

Once or twice he met the curate, but Mr. Quayle showed no desire for his company, and made a point of getting out of his way as quickly as possible. Since his engagement with Claire he had left the rectory, and taken rooms at the farther end of the village. Several considerations had led to the change. In the first place, the Lanes had become decidedly cool with him; in the second place, they watched his movements too narrowly; in the third place, at the far end of the village he would be nearer Claire, and would be

able to go and come without observation ; and, in the last place—and this was the weightiest consideration of all—he would be away from Lucy. For months past it had cut him to the heart to see her drooping and fading day by day like a frost-nipped flower. He knew only too well that his treatment of her had a great deal to do with her illness. She had given him all her heart, and he, brute that he was, had trampled it in the dust. Nor was that all ; in trampling upon her heart he had crushed his own. She was his idol still. He felt sometimes that he would give up everything on earth for the joy of taking her in his arms and calling her his own ; but in that, as in other things, he never had the courage to follow the lead of his better nature. His greed of power and position grew up like thorns, and choked the good seed, and made his soul a desert. And so he went away from the rectory, where he would not be compelled to watch her droop and die. To her his going was another stab, which left her more deeply wounded still.

So the days went by, and she grew weaker and weaker ; but Mr. Quayle rarely came to see her, nor did she wish him to come. She had given him up at last without reserve. In silence and pain she had fought her battle, and at length had won the victory, but the struggle had cost her her life. She had a feeling that if he came to see her often the old love and longing might return, and she shrank, as well she might, from having to fight her battle over again.

Mr. Quayle heard from day to day how, with sweet gentle eyes and patient face, his love was walking the slanting way to the shadowy land of death, and into his heart would come sometimes an unutterable longing to go and take her in his arms and tell her how he loved her, and beg her to live for his sake. But he had gone too far to retreat. He had staked his all on wealth and position, and must abide by the result. But the strain told upon his health and damped his spirits. Some of his parishioners said that the zeal of the Lord's house had eaten him up ; that he was working beyond his strength ; that he would be in his grave in a few years, unless he took things more quietly.

Claire at last pleaded with him to work less hard and be less lavish of his strength and energy. But he laugh-

ingly told her not to alarm herself, that he was all right in spite of his pale cheeks, and that when summer came he would look as well as ever. She little guessed the secret pain that was gnawing at his heart and making his life a burden; little dreamed of his love for Lucy Lane, or of her love for him. While they, in their turn, never thought of the shadow that lay upon her life and beclouded all her future. She tried her best in those days to love her lover, but tried in vain. Indeed, her love was like sleep—the more she wooed the more it would not come. She admired Mr. Quayle, revered him, in fact. He was her *beau idéal* of what a clergyman should be. But she discovered that reverence was not love.

"I shall be happy with him," she would say to herself, "because we shall be one in aim and one in sympathy; because I shall be able to look up to him and trust him; because my aunt wished it, and because to walk by his side is the path where duty clearly leads."

Yet, reason with herself as she might, she found herself constantly hungering for a sight of Eric's face, and wondering whether they would ever meet again on earth.

So the days travelled slowly on, and with the advent of May, sweet, gentle Lucy Lane quietly and unexpectedly breathed her last. She had been no worse than usual during the day; they had brought her downstairs a little after noon, and she had walked across the room to her place on the sofa, then, with a gentle sigh, her head drooped and she "fell on sleep." The doctor said it was failure of the heart's action, and hinted that the sudden change in the weather had probably something to do with it. But whatever the explanation, the fact was there: the Rector's sweet and best-loved child had passed beyond the sunset.

When she lay in her coffin Mr. Quayle came and asked to see her. She looked very beautiful, with her wealth of hair like an aureole about her face. And as the light fell upon it, it reflected its colour upon her cheeks, so that in very truth she did not look like one dead, but only sleeping.

The Curate was very pale, and his legs trembled so much that he could scarcely stand; but he had evidently braced himself for the ordeal. Taking his place by the side of the

coffin, he folded his arms tightly across his breast and waited for the lid to be removed. He gave a little gasp when her face stood revealed in its gentle grace and beauty; but he betrayed no other sign of emotion.

And this was his love: dead of a broken heart, and he had no right even to kiss her brow. Ah, well! she was beyond the pain and disappointment at last. She had fought her fight and won her victory, and had entered into life. She did not heed that he was looking at her with eager eyes and a breaking heart. He was nothing to her now. She was alike indifferent to his love or hate. He had done his worst, and it had only meant for her an earlier heaven. Gentle and trusting as she was, she had been brave enough to keep her secret to herself. None knew what had passed between them, none but their two selves. And now those pale lips, that she had allowed him to press in purest love, were closed for ever. Ah, how different it might have been had he been true to himself, true to her, true to God!

"Oh, Lucy, Lucy," his heart kept saying, "would to God I had died instead of thee"; but his lips were as pale and as tightly closed as her own.

He did not know how long he stood there gazing at the sweet sleeping face. He only knew that the best of his life had gone, and that his burden was becoming intolerable.

He turned suddenly round at length, and walked away. Through the long village he moved like one in a dream. Here and there people spoke to him as he passed, but he did not heed them. He saw nothing save Lucy's pale and patient face, and that he knew he would continue to see to his dying day.

Three days later they laid her to rest in the quiet churchyard. Mr. Quayle hoped that he might be spared the pain of reading the Burial Service, but it was not to be. It almost seemed to him as if the Rector's family had conspired to torment him. "They cannot know," was his thought, "or they would not ask me."

But, whether they knew or not, they did ask him, and he had not the courage to refuse. All the village came to Lucy's funeral, for she was universally loved. It was a bright sunny day, with a cold north-east wind; in fact,

there was a sprinkle of snow on the tops of the hills, and as people buttoned their coats around them, they said they never remembered so cold a May. In the shadow of the church, where they had dug Lucy's grave the wind swept around like a breath from the poles.

Into the ordeal Mr. Quayle had thrown all his strength and power of will.

"I will go through with it," he said, with clenched fists; "and they shall never know," and his conduct justified his boast. He read the service with scarcely a tremor in his voice. But when he stood by the grave side with head uncovered, his face looked like the face of the dead, his lips were dry and livid, his cheeks sunken, his eyes unnaturally bright.

He shuddered visibly while uttering the words, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," but instantly recovered himself, and finished the service without further sign of emotion.

He was observed to stagger, however, on leaving the grave side, though no one thought anything of it at the time. He left the church by the vestry door, and staggered to his rooms unobserved. By midnight he was in a raging fever, and a week later the doctor gave no hope of his recovery.

CHAPTER XLI.

AS WE SOW.

“ And in the shadow I have passed along,
Feeling myself grow weak as it grew strong ;
Walking in doubt, and searching for the way,
And often at a stand—as now, to-day.
And if before me on the path there lies
A spot of brightness, from imagined skies,
Imagined shadows fall across it, too,
And the far future takes the present hue.”

ANON.

A FEW days after the funeral of Lucy Lane, Mary Vincent left Lindon Hall for her home in Devonshire. “ I will come again, dear, when you are married,” she said to Claire when kissing her good-bye. “ Only give me a little breathing time first.”

“ Do you think I am in such a very great hurry, then ? ” Claire asked, with a smile.

“ Oh, no ; but perhaps some one else is. I hope he will soon be able to throw off his cold,” and then the train began to move out of the station.

“ Don’t forget to write,” was Claire’s parting word, to which, however, she got no answer. And then she entered her carriage, and drove slowly home through the shady lanes.

At the Hall gates Robin pulled up at a signal from Dr. Bailey, who came hurriedly up to the carriage side, and began to talk to Claire in low, anxious tones.

“ I think it is only right, Miss Leicester,” he said, “ that you should know that Mr. Quayle is very seriously ill—dangerously ill, I may say, and he particularly wishes to see you at once.”

"But he will get better, doctor?" she questioned, growing very pale. "I thought it was only a feverish cold he had."

- "He was very much run down at the start," was the answer. "And was not fit to stand bareheaded in the churchyard in the teeth of a biting north wind. I wonder how many more people will have to be killed off before the absurd custom of standing uncovered at gravesides is given up."

"You think he got cold, then, doctor?"

"I am sure of it, and being very much run down, it soon developed into inflammation of the lungs. But will you go and see him, Miss Leicester?"

"You think I ought, doctor?" she questioned, anxiously.

"I do," he said, abruptly. "The case is urgent. Proprieties must stand aside at such times."

"That will do," she said. "Will you tell Robin to drive at once to Mr. Quayle's?"

It did not take many minutes to reach the house where the curate lodged, and without any ceremony she was shown at once into his room.

"Thank you for coming, Claire," he gasped, reaching out to her his wasted hand. "Shake hands with me for the last time. No; do not come nearer; sit there where I can look at you. I have much to say; and when I have finished, you will loathe me as I loathe myself. But first take this key and unlock the top left-hand drawer. You will find a large envelope in it full of papers; take them, read them when you get home; act with respect to them as you think right."

He had talked straight on without a pause, while she listened almost like one in a dream. "Surely he is defirious," was her thought; but she obeyed him without a word.

With bright and restless eyes he followed her every movement.

"All the papers are in that envelope," he said, as she closed the drawer. "Never mind the key. Ah! I did not think it would have come to this; and yet I might have known. Death comes to all of us sooner or later; but to me it has come sooner than I expected."

"Oh, Heber, don't distress yourself," she said, pleadingly. "Pray be calm. You will get better again."

"No, no!" he said, impatiently. "Don't interrupt me, Claire. I must make what restitution I can before I die. It is only a little over a week since Lucy died. You did not know, but my heart is with her in her grave. I loved her, and I won her love, and then I cast her off and broke her heart. Oh, the curse of greed——"

"Nay; sit down and hear me out," he said, seeing Claire had risen to her feet, white and trembling. "The worst is yet to come, and I am preparing you for it. *Please* sit down, it is my last request. I might have been a good man, but lust of wealth and power has spoiled my life."

"I do not know what all this is tending to," she said, in hard, unnatural tones; for she felt as though, she had scarcely any power of articulation left.

"A moment more," he said, "and you shall know." And then he began at the beginning and told her all the story, with which the reader is acquainted. He hid nothing. He did not spare himself. He believed he was dying, and did not dare, in the presence of death, to equivocate in the smallest degree. Death, like conscience, makes cowards of us all. "I have tried to destroy those papers again and again," he concluded, "but it was not to be. An unseen power stayed my hand. He who fights against God always loses the battle. There, I have done; and may God have mercy on my soul!"

For a moment there was silence in the room. Then Claire rose slowly to her feet. She still felt like one in a dream.

"You do not speak, you do not curse me," he faltered.

"I will say nothing now," she stammered at length. "I will read those papers first. I must have time to think. Good-bye, and may God help you," and she turned quickly and left the room.

On reaching home she went at once to the library and locked the door, then throwing herself into an easy-chair she began to read, first the Major's confession, then his will. A second time she read them, then she got up and began to pace the room.

What a revelation of wrong and suffering that day had given to her! Yes, wrong and suffering. The two things

were inseparable, the one followed the other as night followed day; wrong was the seed, suffering the harvest.

For the rest of the day she moved about the house with white, resolute face. She had decided upon her course of action, and began at once to carry it into effect. She did not seem in the least troubled at her loss of fortune, and she was greatly relieved that her engagement with Mr. Quayle was at an end.

"I can earn my own living," she said to herself, "and I shall be happier doing so, and Eric will be lord of Lindon. Oh, I am so glad. Sharp, Keen and Sharp will be sure to find him, for they are clever lawyers; and won't he be glad to get back to Lindon. I wonder if he still cares for me. I hope he does not; nay, I hope he does. Oh, dear, what a contradiction I am; I don't know what I hope. He will be all the happier if he has ceased to care for me, and I want him to be happy, and yet I would like him to think of me sometimes. Oh, I am so selfish; and yet I do want Eric to be happy above all things."

So she communed with herself as she went from room to room gathering her things together. On the following day Sharp, Keen and Sharp, as well as the old steward, were put in possession of all the facts of the case, and then she went away from Lindon. No one at the Hall knew why she went away, or where she was going, or when she would be back again. It was supposed she had only gone on a visit to some friend, and so no one troubled himself.

A few days later, however, an advertisement appeared in all the London and provincial papers, to the effect that if Eric Strome, late of Priory Mere, would apply to Sharp, Keen and Sharp, Solicitors, Ribblesford, he would hear of something to his advantage.

Then slowly the story began to leak out, till Lindon was shaken to its very foundations. But even when all was told there remained one mystery that no one seemed able to explain. "In whose hands had the papers been since the death of the Major?"

To this question no answer was forthcoming. If Sharp, Keen and Sharp knew, they refused to tell. As a matter of fact they did know. But it was Claire's most earnest wish that, if possible, Mr. Quayle might be screened.

So the question was asked every day, and a hundred

times a day, and the story was discussed in all its bearings. Of course, as is usual in such cases, quite a number of people grew suddenly wise after the event. "They had known all along that young Strome was in some way related to the Major. And they had always believed he had another wife somewhere. They had never been surprised that he had kept out of England so long. They had been expecting some such revelation ever since his death."

When the tidings reached Priory Mere Hardman treated it as a piece of idle gossip. But Homer and Sarah, having more credulity than their master, executed something like a war-dance in the kitchen, so great was their delight.

A visit to Sharp, Keen and Sharp, however, convinced Hardman of the truth of the story, and after that he spent his days in a perfect fever of impatience, so eager was he for tidings of his long-lost nephew.

Mr. Quayle, with that peculiar contradictoriness of nature and temperament which was so characteristic of him, gave the lie direct to the doctor's predictions, and began to get better. But whether he was pleased or otherwise at the turn of events no one ever knew. He listened unmoved to the story that was shaking the village, and secretly rejoiced that Claire had not revealed his share in the transaction, but he asked no questions and ventured no opinion. Even when told that Claire had left the Hall and gone no one knew whither, he did not betray the least concern. He seemed dead to Lindon and Lindon dead to him.

And now, in order to give something like sequence to our story, it will be necessary to retrace our steps a few months.

On the evening following that on which Eric, driven by want and despair, hid himself in the dark and turbulent waters of the Thames, our old friend Ezra Short, of Toledo, might have been seen toasting his toes before the fire, in the comfortable smoke-room of a London hotel. Contrary to the expectations of the doctors, he had slipped the noose that death had knotted for him in Algiers, and after several months of suffering, had recovered his usual health and spirits. Since when, like a character of great celebrity, he

had spent his time in going to and fro on the earth, and walking up and down on it; and now, after some years of "globe trotting," he found himself in the dead of winter in London. This fact—on the evening in question—led him to serious reflection.

"I can't imagine," he said to himself, "what in the name o' the seven sleepers of Ephesus can have induced me to come to England at this season of the year," and he settled himself more deeply in his easy-chair, and watched, languidly, the smoke from his cigar curling gracefully towards the ceiling.

Across his knee, in a long strip, lay the evening paper, which he had not opened yet. "I must thaw a bit before I begin to read," was his reflection, when he came into the room. "Talk about our American winters, why they are jam an' honey compared with this English climate," and he pulled at his cigar with increasing vigour.

"I might as well have stayed in Nice," he went on, "or gone across to Algiers. Why I fretted so to get where I could hear my native tongue spoken, beats me," and then he shut his eyes while his thoughts went straying back over the experiences of the last few years. He had lingered in Algiers long after his recovery was complete; had climbed the rugged slopes of the Atlas, and loitered through the vineyards of Bona; had spent weeks in exploring the Arab tanneries of Constantine, and had ridden through the golden gate of the desert to the palm forests of Biskrah. He had wintered in Egypt and extended his travels to the Holy Land. Returning to Europe, he had spent weeks in Constantinople, and had gone northward to Holy Moscow. He had skated on the Neva, and, waiting till summer, had crossed the Baltic to Christiania, and had revelled among the Fjords of Norway. With returning winter he had found himself in Corsica, from whence he sailed to Naples, and explored Italy from end to end. In the hot season he got as near the snow line in Switzerland as he could reasonably get, and now in the middle of winter he found himself "stranded" in London.

"I guess I'm purty much of a simpleton," he said to himself, opening his eyes. "I ought to have known what kind of weather to expect on this forlorn island. Talk

about the Gulf Stream warming the shores of Britain, why, blame me, if this weather ain't damp enough and cold enough to give a seal the influenza."

And he opened the paper lying on his knee, and began to read.

"Hullo," he said at length, opening his eyes wide. "What's the meaning of this?" And he edged his chair nearer the light, and began to read aloud in disjointed sentences, for there was no one else in the room.

"Young man—refined and intelligent appearance—shabbily dressed—charged with attempting to commit suicide—refused to give his name—supposed to be an American—miniature Testament found in his pocket—name on fly-leaf, Ezra Short, Toledo.—Remanded till to-morrow morning."

"Stars and stripes," he said, laying down the paper, "there's some mystery here. I gave my pocket Testament to that boy Eric out yonder in Algiers. Doctors thought I was going to die. The boy had saved my life, and I told him the little book might save him. Good Lord! it can't be Eric. Surely he'd never attempt to do a thing like that. And yet—but no, it cannot be. Anyhow, I must look into that court-to-morrow morning."

Mr. Short slept very little that night. His brain was in a whirl. He had wondered thousands of times what had become of the bright, handsome young fellow whom he had got so fond of in Algiers, and who had rendered him such signal service; wondered whether, in the order of Providence, they would ever meet again on earth; or if they had drifted asunder, like ships in mid-ocean, to meet no more for ever.

True to his resolve, he was among the first to enter the court-room on the following morning; and never did he spend such an hour of feverish impatience as he spent that day. The other cases did not interest him at all. He scarcely heard a word of what was said. At length, however, his waiting was rewarded. Without any noise or ado, there stepped quickly into the dock a tall, ragged, emaciated young man, who stood with bent head and arms folded across his chest.

Short gave a sigh of relief. "It ain't him," he said to himself. "I thought it never could be him."



Eric grasped the front of the dock to save himself from falling.

“What’s your name?” said the presiding magistrate.

“I decline to give it,” was the answer, in firm, but quiet tones.

Short started as though he had been shot. “Good heavens! it’s Eric, after all,” he muttered.

“Why did you attempt to drown yourself?”

“Because I am tired of life, and wish to end it.”

“But have you no friends?”

“Not a friend.”

“Nay, Eric,” cried Short, unable to contain himself any longer, “you have two friends at least; one here and another in heaven.”

So sudden and unexpected was the interruption that the magistrate nearly jumped out of his seat. A burly policeman near Short, cried out, “Order! order!” in his most stentorian tones, while Eric grasped the front of the dock to save himself from falling.

“You know this young man?” said the magistrate, when he had recovered himself.

“I do,” said Short, the tears running down his face; “and a better I don’t want to know.”

“Will you please favour us with your name?”

“Ezra Short, of Toledo.”

“That is the name on the fly-leaf of the Testament.”

“Exactly. I gave it him, and said it might save his life some day, and by the blessing of heaven its going to do it yet.”

At this point Eric uttered a low moan, and sank upon the floor.

“You hand him over to me, Judge,” said Mr. Short; “I’ll be responsible for his good behaviour, and I’ll take care of him too.”

After some little parleying, this was conceded. In fact, the magistrate seemed glad to be relieved of any further responsibility in the case, and half an hour later, Short and Eric drove away together in a cab, the latter more dead than alive.

For the next fortnight Eric never left his bed, and Short scarcely ever left his side. “I know now what brought me to England in the dead of winter,” he would say to himself, “The good hand of God is in it all.”

During nearly the whole of the first week, Eric lay with

closed eyes, taking no notice of anything. He was evidently in no humour for conversation, and Short did not press him.

"He'll begin to talk of his own freewill in time," was his reflection. "Meanwhile, I can afford to wait; he keeps his eyes shut, but he ain't asleep, he's thinking all the while, and thinking will do him good. When the prodigal began to think he soon started for home. Poor lad! there's trouble behind all this, and despair. That uncle of his brought him up without religion, and so he had no anchor in the storm. The Lord have mercy on us all."

A few evenings later, while Short sat a little way from the bed in the light of the fire, Eric turned on his side and said quietly, "I should like to talk with you, Mr. Short, if you would not mind."

"Mind! Why, Eric, my boy, I've been aching to talk for a week or more; now fire away, swift and strong."

He smiled feebly for a moment, then answered, "Nay, I can't fire much; there's no powder left in me. But I should like to say it is very kind of you to take all this trouble with me, but it is kindness thrown away. I'm not worth it. The great law of nature is the survival of the fittest. It is right the fit should live, the useless should be allowed to die off. Now, I belong to the useless tribe. I am not fit for anything. I'm only in the way of other people, and the sooner I get out of the way the better. I'm sorry they did not let me drown. It was foolish to drag me back to a life that I'm tired of, and to a world where I am in the way. If they had let me alone I should have been out of the way of everybody. Out of my own way, out of pain, and out of trouble."

"You think so, Eric?" Short observed, with a smile.

• "Think so. What else? Birth is the beginning of existence, death the end. If there was anything to exist for I would be content to live on till the law of decay should complete its work. But I have nothing, Mr. Short. Life for me has no purpose or hope or meaning. I have clung to life simply from an instinct of my nature, that is all. But I have conquered that now. I do not want to live. I am angry with the people who pulled me out of the river, the mere pain of dying was over with me, the struggle was at an end; now it will have to be gone through a

second time, and why should I be put to all this trouble?"

Short smiled again, but did not attempt to check the current of his talk. His object was to let him say all he had to say before he began to reason with him.

"Ah! you smile, and think, perhaps, I am a little dejected. But you do not know what I have suffered. For nearly a year I tried my hardest and best, and every day I sank lower and lower, and never a star of hope gleamed in the sky during all these months. Do you know what it is to be famished, frozen, sick, and in despair? You will talk of Providence, I know; but what Providence was there over me? I tell you there was no eye of pity anywhere."

"Ah, Eric, there you are mistaken. But go on."

"Mistaken? No; I know what I have passed through, and I have had enough of it. Life is a fraud, and hope a cheat. All that I have cared for I have lost; every pleasure has turned to ashes in the mouth; every ambition has been dashed to the ground; all my striving has ended in failure; I have discovered I am not wanted; I am in the way; the world will be the better without me."

"Some day, Eric, you will think differently," Short said, quietly.

"Some day I shall not think at all," he answered. and he turned away his head and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XLII.

INTO LIGHT.

"I touched the garment-hem of truth,
Yet saw not all its splendour;
I knew enough of doubt to feel
For every conscience tender.
God left men free of choice, as when
His Eden trees were planted;
Because they chose amiss should I
Deny the gift he granted?"

WHITTIER.

"ERIC!"

"Yes, Mr. Short."

"I want to talk to you."

The sufferer turned himself wearily for a moment; then answered, "you listened to me the other day, Mr. Short, I should be ungrateful, indeed, if I were unwilling to listen to you."

"I'd rather you'd listen for the pleasure of it than out of gratitude; but never mind. You've moped long enough. We don't like folks to disturb us when we are sleepy, but it is good for us sometimes, so I am going to consider your benefit; not your likes. I notice you have been reading the New Testament lately."

"Yes, I have read it through."

"And what do you think of it?"

"I don't know. It is a wonderful book in many ways, but I can't understand it. To me it is a fable that wants a key to explain it."

"Quite true, Eric; and the key is the spirit of Christ. Yes, yes; it isn't a book to be grasped in a moment. It grows upon you as the great world of beauty grows upon you, or as the sea grows upon you the longer you look."

"Jesus Christ was a very beautiful character, no doubt," Eric went on, after a pause. "Too beautiful, in fact, for earth. His friends who wrote the story have, no doubt, idealised Him, and to me they have overdone it. He would have seemed greater had they made Him less, if you will allow the paradox."

"I don't understand you," said Short.

"Well, I mean this," said Eric. "They lay too great embargo on your credulity. In the midst of His beautiful teachings—and I cannot deny their beauty—you are continually startled and shocked by some impossible story of superhuman power."

"You refer to His miracles?"

"To His alleged miracles. I accept His moral teachings. I can conceive of nothing higher or nobler. But when I am asked to believe some impossible story, such as that of opening a man's eyes who was born blind, or curing a leper with a touch, then I draw back and say, no."

"But if He were divine," said Mr. Short; "if he were the revelation of God to man, or, as St. Paul puts it, 'God manifest in the flesh,' there would be nothing impossible about His miracles then?"

"That is a great 'if,' Mr. Short," said Eric, with a smile.

"But suppose I can match the miracles He is said to have wrought in the days of His flesh, with miracles He is working to-day. What will you say then?"

"Show me such a miracle, and I will consider it."

"I have told you what I once was, Eric. You know what I am now. God knows I am nothing to boast of."

"I know you are one of the best men that ever trod the earth," Eric said, impulsively.

"Nay, not that Eric; but what I am, I am by the grace of God. He touched me and healed me. And is it less a miracle to cure a man morally diseased than to cure a man physically diseased?"

"I admit when you argue from your own experience, I am puzzled, and in some measure silenced," Eric answered at length. "I believe you once were what you have told me. I know what you are to-day. I admit the change, but I do not accept the inference."

"Then you do not believe that Christ has performed a miracle in me?"

"No, I do not."

"Then who has? There cannot be an effect without a cause. Then who, or what is that cause?"

"There may have been many causes."

"Name them."

"You may have grown tired of the life you were leading. Disgusted with your surroundings; or, perhaps, your common sense came to your rescue."

Short smiled kindly for a moment, then answered, "Ah, Eric, my boy, such an answer does not explain the riddle. With me it is no matter of doubt. I know in whom I have believed, and when I believed the change came. Christianity isn't a creed, it is Christ. We accept Him, not theories about Him, and He cures us."

"That is your theory," said Eric, with a smile; "and if nineteen other Christian men were in this room the chances are that every man of them would have a different theory."

"Nay, Eric, there you are mistaken. In matters of creed and ritual and Churchism we might all differ. But when we get down to the foundation truth that Christ, and Christ alone, saves men, then we are all agreed."

Eric was silent, and Short did not pursue the question farther. But a week later when he was able to get downstairs, Short said to him one afternoon as they sat alone in the drawing-room,

"Well, Eric, have you got over that argument from experience yet?"

"No, Mr. Short; indeed, it grows upon me the more I look at it."

"Some day, when you are able to get out of doors, I will introduce you to a few more examples."

"One example, if it be credible, is as good as a hundred."

"Better, Eric, if the example should be yourself. Some day, I am hoping, you will put the matter to the test."

"You are greatly concerned about me," he said, with a half pathetic smile. "I am quite sure I am not worth it."

"You are no judge of that matter, Eric. I came here in dead of winter, and called myself a fool for coming. Now I know why I came and what led me here. God has

a great future for you, and for years he has been preparing you for it. You will value the light all the more, when you get out of the darkness in which you have wandered so long. And liberty will be all the sweeter after the long bondage."

"Ah, Mr. Short," said Eric, "I wish I had your faith. If I had any hope of living to purpose I should be glad to live; but I repeat, I am fit for nothing. I have not been trained for service. I cannot even earn my own bread. I tell you, the people who would not let me drown made a great mistake." •

"You will know better some day. God's purposes have to be carried out, however much we try to thwart them."

"A very pretty idea, no doubt," Eric said, "but utterly beyond me."

"Then you do not believe God led me here?"

"No; I believe it just happened so."

"Ah, Eric," Short observed, with a smile, "it is a sad state of darkness for a young man to be in, but I don't despair. God gave me light, and He'll give it you. All in good time, Eric, all in good time."

It was the beginning of April before the doctor allowed Eric to venture out of doors, and even then he was only allowed to take short walks in the middle of the day.

"I'm an awful burden to you," he said one evening to Mr. Short. "I wish I was dead and out of the way. Here I have been all these weeks dependent on your charity, and as far as I can see I shall never be able to repay you."

"I guess, my lad, you paid me beforehand," Short observed, quietly. "In Algiers you saved my life, and I shall never feel we are quits until, by God's help, I have saved yours."

"Mine was a very simple act, and cost me nothing," Eric said, with averted eyes. "You have spent I know not how much on me and I am on your hands still."

"And I'm glad to have you, Eric. I have plenty, and so am making no sacrifice. When you get stronger we will talk about the future."

"Have you any plans, Mr. Short? For you are my providence."

Short smiled, "I guess," he said, "when the weather on this tearful island gets a bit warmer, we'll take a turn in Scotland; then, Eric, you shall go back with me to Toledo. I can get you into business there. Here, nobody knows me; here I have no influence, but on the other side of the water I reckon I can give you a start, and a pretty good one."

Eric's eyes filled. The American's kindness touched his heart, as it had often done before.

"Look here, Mr. Short," he said, "you make it increasingly difficult for me to believe that story about your past life."

"And yet you do believe it, Eric?"

"Well, yes, since you say it is true, for I know you would not tell a falsehood; and yet you puzzle me."

"If you knew the power of Christ you would not be puzzled," said Short, with a smile. "But next week we will begin to collect evidence."

"Evidence?" questioned Eric.

"Well, yes, I am going to show you some of the fruits of Christianity which are to be seen in London. And when you have seen the places where the sick are cared for, and the children fed, and the outcast sheltered, and the fallen reclaimed, I am hoping that you will arrive at the conclusion that Jesus Christ is still alive in the world, and that Christianity is not a decayed superstition."

Eric was silent. This was bringing him face to face with a phase of the question he had not yet considered.

True to his promise, in the following week Mr. Short, accompanied by Eric, began a round of the London charities, or such of them as were easy of access. Eric said but little, but it was very evident his heart was deeply touched. Such a revelation of Christian charity and good-will he had never expected to see. Short very wisely kept from moralising, concluding that such object lessons required no explanations.

In this way they spent a whole week, and finished their expedition by attending a large meeting in the East End, composed exclusively of working people.

It was rather a noisy gathering, with a good deal of unnecessary shouting, and some very wild and illogical

declamation. But after awhile a number of men got up, one after another, and began to relate their experience. Eric listened at first with intense amusement, but afterwards with deep seriousness.

Here was Mr. Short's experience related again and again. Eric could but feel, as he looked at their rough, weather-beaten faces, and listened to their simple, homely words, so free from trick of rhetoric, so full of pathos—that these were changed men; that from drunkenness and brutality they had been won to sobriety and gentleness and love.

But where lay the secret of the change?

Home through the noisy streets he drove with Mr. Short in silence. But that question haunted him, and would not be dismissed. Here again were the miracles of old. The blind were made to see, the lepers were cleansed, the dead were raised.

Here, again, was the argument from experience which he had no wit or skill to controvert.

June dawned upon the earth with cloudless skies. But Eric's life still lay in shadow.

"To-morrow, Eric," said Short, "we will start for Scotland. Three months wandering among her islands and mountains, and we will be ready to cross the herring-pond together."

"As you will," said Eric, with a smile.

But on the following morning, before Mr. Short had finished dressing, Eric burst into his room with radiant face. "Oh, Mr. Short," he exclaimed, "I have found it at last."

"Found what, Eric?"

"The light, the light! Now I know."

Short looked at him a moment with a smile; then he grasped his hand. "I knew it would come, Eric," he said, with choking voice. "I knew it would come." And he turned away his head, to hide his tears.

"And you will excuse me from going to Scotland with you, won't you?"

"Excuse you, Eric?"

"Yes, I want to go home."

"To go home?"

"Yes, to tell uncle, you know, and ask his forgiveness. I have not treated him well."

"God bless you, my boy," said the older man. "Now I know that he has changed you also."

On the following evening Sarah and Homer, as well as their master, were startled by the violent ringing of the door-bell. They were all of them in a very depressed mood, on account of the failure of Messrs. Sharp, Keen, and Sharp to find any trace of Eric.

"I fear evil has befallen him," Sarah was saying to Homer; and then clang went the door-bell.

"Gracious, who's there?" she said, and hurried at once into the hall. The next moment she was crying hysterically.

"Oh, Master Eric," she sobbed, "the Lord be praised."

"And you are glad to see me, Sarah?" And he took her homely face between his hands and kissed her.

"Glad! Oh, Master Eric," she cried, "you don't know how we have longed for your coming."

By this time Homer, hearing the sound of a well-known voice, had hurried after his wife, and catching sight of Eric's face, shouted at the top of his voice, "Glory, glory," and sat down plump upon the floor.

This brought Hardman upon the scene, who at once fell upon his nephew's neck, unable to utter a word.

Eric was the first to speak. "I could not help coming home to tell you, uncle," he said. "Oh, I am so sorry I caused you so much pain."

"Don't say a word about that, Eric," Hardman said, blowing his nose violently, "but we have known for weeks."

"Oh, no, that cannot be, uncle," Eric answered, looking puzzled, "for the light only came to me the night before last."

"But Sharp, Keen, and Sharp have been advertising in all the papers, and the story is in everybody's mouth."

"Ah, we are evidently thinking of matters totally different," said Eric, after a pause. "I came home to tell you that I had got out of the darkness of doubt into the light and freedom of faith."

At this moment Homer sprang from the floor and clapped

his hands: "The Lord be praised," he cried, the tears streaming down his cheeks, "that's better'n bein' Lord o' Lindon."

Sarah sat down on a chair and hid her face in her apron, while Hardman took off his glasses and wiped them meditatively.

"Then you have not heard, Eric?" Hardman said, after a pause.

"I have heard nothing, uncle."

"Then there is a surprise in store for you, a great surprise. Come into the library, Eric, and we will talk over the matter quietly. Oh, I am glad to see you, more glad than words can express. I have longed for your coming, Eric, more than they who watch for the morning. It has been a sad time since you went away. I have suffered much; but adversity has had its uses, Eric, and I will not complain if I can help it. But sit down, Eric, and let me begin at the beginning and tell you all."

Eric looked up into his face, and wondered at the change that had come over him. This was not the hard, cold cynic that he had left more than fifteen months before.

Hardman talked on quietly, and Eric listened, silent and amazed; but before the story was ended, the bells of Lindon church began to clash in wild and joyous revel.

Hardman paused and smiled, "Homer's been into the village and told that the Lord of Lindon has come home," he said, "and this is by way of welcome."

Eric flushed to the roots of his hair, but did not speak, and Hardman talked on again till his story was ended. Then silence fell between them for several minutes.

"And the Major was my father," Eric said at length, more to himself than to his uncle. "Now I understand his love for me and my love for him."

"We understand many things now that were a puzzle before," Hardman replied.

"And Claire, you say, has gone away no one knows where?"

"That is so."

"And the Curate?"

"He has gone away also. He left last week. I presume he knew of her whereabouts and has followed her. He

could not, as an honourable man, give her up, though she had lost her fortune. But I have no doubt it would be a great blow to him."

Eric sighed. "This change in my position depresses me," he said; "the responsibility of wealth weighs me down."

"Ah, Eric," Hardman said, "fortune is a fickle thing. You have become rich, I have become poor."

"You shall have some of mine," Eric said, quickly. "Let me in this way repay you in some measure for all your kindness to me."

"No, no, Eric; but you may be able to accommodate me some day. But we will talk of that later on. Now let us take a ramble out of doors, for the weather is lovely."

So, arm in arm, they strolled away, in the shadow of the wood and down by the river side, while the bells of Lindon church rang out peal after peal of joyous welcome.

"It is sweet to get home again, uncle," Eric said, at length.

"And sweet to have thee home," said Hardman, with trembling voice.

"We have often misunderstood each other, uncle."

"Ah, we have walked blindly," sighed Hardman.

"And you have found the light at last?" Eric asked.

"I hardly know, Eric; I only know I have left the bogs where once I strayed, but as yet I only see men as trees walking."

"It came to me like a flash," Eric said; "and oh, the joy of it!"

"I lay for a long time on the brink of death," Hardman said, in subdued tones, "and what I suffered no tongue can tell. Ah, Eric, it sounds great to talk blank materialism and to sneer at the Christian faith. But in face of death such philosophy as mine had no ray of comfort. I was consumed with terror. But by my side stood one of earth's angels. Her very presence helped to make me strong. You know her, Eric, you met her at Bonn."

Eric bowed his head, and into his eyes came a far away

look which clearly enough showed where his thoughts had strayed.

"Ah, but for those Christian souls who surrounded me I should have died," Hardman went on, "I shall never speak ill of Christianity again."

So they talked until the stars came out, and the bells had ceased to ring, and then they went into the house again to recount the story of the past.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AND LAST.

“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
God is not dead! nor doth He sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, goodwill to men.”

LONGFELLOW.

THREE years and more have passed away since the events recorded in the last chapter. Eric, though lord of Lindon, still lives at Priory Mere, and manifests no inclination to leave it. Homer and Sarah are still the presiding geniuses of garden and kitchen; but Hardman is seen no longer in his favourite haunts. Always sensitive to what people might say and think, and sadly lacking in the highest kind of courage, he shrank from declaring among his old companions his change of views, and was not unfrequently hurt by their ungenerous criticism. Moreover, he was not yet master of himself. During his long illness he had lost to a very large extent the intense craving for opium, which once had dominated him. But there were still times, particularly when his old enemy neuralgia assailed him, when a measure of the old longing would come back, and he would experience a thrill of horror that, for the time being, would completely unman him. At such times he longed for the soothing and inspiring presence of Mary Vincent. Indeed, so strong did this desire become that he took a journey into Devonshire on purpose to see her. And so kind was the welcome he received and so refreshed was he by the balmy air of that western county, that soon after he paid a second visit, and that was followed by a third.

It was during his third visit that he became fully convinced that the climate of Devonshire suited him very much better than that of his more northern home. And on his return to Priory Mere he told Eric that if he could

succeeded in letting the old homestead at a good rental he should take up his residence permanently in the west.

Eric laughed softly to himself when Hardman made known to him his plans.

"I see clearly enough," he said to himself, "what is in the wind; and if he can persuade Mary Vincent to marry him it will be his salvation."

A few days later Eric said to him, "I shall be very sorry for you to leave Priory Mere, uncle. But if you have made up your mind to do so, I will gladly rent the place. I have no wish to live at the Hall; in fact, I have other plans respecting it."

Hardman's eyes sparkled. "You are quite sure," he said, "that you do not propose this merely to accommodate me?"

"Quite sure, uncle."

"Then I will take you as a tenant, Eric," and he took off his glasses and began to wipe them with great deliberation. "You see," he went on, "I am not so well off as I once was; I am ashamed to tell you the extent to which I have been robbed. But with the rent of Priory Mere added to what I have, we can live very comfortably, very comfortably indeed."

"You say *we* can live, uncle," Eric remarked, with a sly twinkle in his eye. "I presume you do not refer to Homer and Sarah!"

"Well, no, not exactly," he said, blushing slightly, and turning to the glass in order the better to adjust his spectacles. "The truth is I thought you would like them to remain. They really seem a part of the place, and they are very much attached to you, and I would like them to be comfortable; they have been good friends to me, very good friends."

"But surely you will not live alone."

"Well, no, Eric, I hope not—that is—well, you see, I may possibly—that is—of course you know the old saying, 'many a slip'—you know, and all that."

Eric laughed outright. "Come, uncle," he said, "you need not beat about the bush any longer. Of course you intend to get married."

"Well, yes, Eric," and Hardman got very red in the face, and turned again to the glass to adjust his spectacles.

"And Mary Vincent is to be the happy woman?"

"She is, Eric—that is——"

"I congratulate you, uncle. I should have said once you were a lucky fellow, now I say a kindly Providence has blessed you abundantly."

So it came about that, before the Christmas bells rang, Hardman was comfortably settled in a snug little home near Torquay, with Mary Vincent as his happy wife. Hardman has only one regret, and that is that he did not meet her sooner. Often he has said to her, as they have sat together in the long peaceful evenings over their cheerful fire, "Ah, Mary, if you had only crossed my path sooner, I should have been saved many a long struggle with doubt and darkness."

And she has answered, "Perhaps so, Philip; but God has ordered all things well."

Meanwhile Eric has converted Lindon Hall into a home of rest for sick and poor and deserving people. In this enterprise he had the assistance of Mr. Short. As soon as he had got comfortably settled he wrote to the American:

"Come at once; I have often needed you, but never so much as now. I want to do something, but know not what. Come and advise me, and be quick about it."

"ERIC."

So Short came down from Scotland, where he had been rustivating alone, and spent the rest of the summer at Priory Mere.

"I realise that I am only a steward," Eric said to him, "and I want to act wisely. Ever since the death of old Geoffrey Preston the estate has kept steadily increasing in value, and it does not seem to be a right thing to lay up wealth for unknown generations, while there are so many poor and suffering all around us in need of help."

"I quite agree with you," said Mr. Short; "that is just where, as Christians, we fail, and where, as Churches, we fail. We are so anxious about the other world that we neglect our duty in this, and so intent upon saving souls, as we call it, that we forget men have bodies to be saved as well."

"I am not going to find fault with what other men do, or with what Churches do," Eric answered, slowly. "I

"I am only a beginner yet, and have nearly all to learn. But the more I read the gospels the more I feel this, that conduct is three parts of life. It seems to matter precious little what we believe unless we live up to it. I think I shall never wrangle, Mr. Short, about creeds or ecclesiasticism. Such things may have their place, but they do not impress me. They do not feed the hungry or heal the sick, and that was what Jesus Christ was always doing."

"Aye, Eric, that is true."

"And, as I understand it, Mr. Short, the disciple is to be like his Master. That is just where I have got to at present. My work in Lindon is not to fight schism or stamp out dissent; at least, it seems so to me. I shall fight neither sects or creeds. Church and Chapel are alike to me, and they are Christian in so far as they represent Christ's spirit. Am I right in this?"

"I think you are, Eric. 'He that doeth righteousness is righteous,' the Book says. The people admitted into His kingdom are the people who do His will."

"I am glad to be confirmed in this," Eric went on. "Daily I keep asking for more light, and I think it comes. I had a long chat yesterday with the old Rector. For years he has been waiting in the glow of sunset for the opening of the gates. And he urged me to go on in the way I had started. In his younger days, he said, he spent much precious time and strength in fighting shadows, and too late he learned that religion meant doing God's will."

"Aye, aye," said Short, "I guess a precious lot of ammunition has been wasted by the sects in fighting each other, that ought to have been poured into the strongholds of vice, and greed, and drunkenness, and oppression, and evils of that kind."

"Well, you see, I want to be saved from that," said Eric. "Now, what can I do? I am thrust into this position of steward; I have all this wealth—how am I to spend it? Here is Lindon Hall empty—how shall I use it?"

So, after long and earnest conversation, Eric resolved to convert it into such a home as we have indicated. This was the firstfruits of his faith. To say that his charity was never abused would be to say what was not strictly true; but that did not greatly trouble him.

"I would rather be deceived sometimes," he would say,

"than that a single deserving case should lack the help I am able to give."

Of course he came in for a large share of criticism. Everybody that had a fad or a craze called upon him for a subscription, and expected a large one, and, frequently, great was the disappointment, and greater the indignation, when the subscription was not forthcoming. Plenty of people, he discovered, posed as philanthropists who were careful to give little or nothing of their own. They liked to figure on committees, they would collect subscriptions from others, but they gave nothing themselves.

This cheap and fussy philanthropy rather disgusted him, but he did not complain. "I suppose each must work in his own way, and I must work in mine."

So more than two years went by, and the work grew upon his hands. Among other things, he established a school for wood carving; and among his earliest pupils was the lad who had befriended him in London, Jack Martin. Jack proved to be quite a genius, and to-day gives every promise of a future of great success.

Yet, though Eric's life was so filled up with good works, he felt all the while that he lacked something yet. Again and again he had tried to discover Claire's whereabouts, but, so far, had signally failed. For the first year he had supposed she was Mr. Quayle's wife, but a conversation with Robin Ray respecting what transpired on the night of the Major's death awakened a suspicion in his mind, which he followed up with great care and diligence until he had got at the truth.

"Now, then, I know she has not married Mr. Quayle," he said to himself. "And I must find her if she is to be found."

But the task proved no easy one. And, as the weeks and months slipped away and he could gain no tidings of her, he grew a little depressed. He felt that the only thing that could round his life into completeness he still lacked. His schemes of charity had so extended that he longed for some one with whom he could take counsel; and always his thoughts turned to Claire.

How she would rejoice in the sick being cared for and the deserving finding help. After his daily visit to Lindon Hall he would sometimes return by Router Height, and sit where Claire had sat when first he saw her. There on

the rocks, with the birds whistling in the trees all around him, and the summer wind chanting its low lullaby, he would dream of the past. How strangely he had been led; how tangled the skein of his life; how painful many of his experiences; how fraught with trouble his mistakes. And yet, in spite of all, an unseen power had shielded him, and life's true meaning had been revealed to him at last.

But Claire, who had been so long the light of his eyes and the hope of his heart, was she never to be his? Was he destined to walk alone?

Often in the cool of the evening he walked down by the riverside in quiet meditation. Short had gone back to his home in Toledo, and there was no one in Lindon whose company he particularly craved. In fact, his neighbours had very little sympathy with him in his work.

"It is all very well, Strome," they would say, "to lend a helping hand to deserving people, and give a month's rest and good food to the tired and overworked, and all that sort of thing; but really there is no fun in it. If you would give a good dinner to your friends now and then, and spend an evening among people whose company you could appreciate, then there would be a great deal more enjoyment in it."

And Eric would answer with a smile, "From your point of view there might be more enjoyment; but, for my own part, I do not see the wisdom of spending money in dinners and costly wines for people who are neither hungry or sick; if I feed people at all it shall be those in need of food."

So he quietly went on his own way, but he walked alone. At length he got a hint that Claire was in Germany, and he started at once for Bonn.

"Yes, she had been in Bonn," so he was told, "but she had left eighteen months previously, to take a position as governess in Strasburg." On to Strasburg he rushed by the next train, only to learn that the people who had engaged her had removed to Heidelberg. At Heidelberg he spent nearly a week in discovering the residence of Professor Vasdeker, and when he reached the house the bird had flown.

"Miss Leicester had lived with them for six months," the professor told him; "and then had taken another situation at Frankfort."

"With whom?"

The professor did not know.

So with a heavy heart he turned away, and purchased a ticket for Frankfort. There he learned, when he had been in the town a week, that a wealthy banker, Heidelshiner by name, employed an English governess, but at present he was staying with his family in Wiesbaden.

So to Wiesbaden Eric hurried by the next train, and, after engaging rooms at an hotel, sauntered into the *Kursaal*, with a print containing a full list of visitors in his pocket.

But disappointment still dogged his steps. There were, at least, a dozen Heidelshiners in Wiesbaden, and who was to tell him which was the one he sought? On all hands well-dressed people were marching up and down. Bands were discoursing sweet music and fountains were flinging jets of water high into the air, but amid it all he sat lonely and depressed.

At length he got up and strolled away through a narrow path, that he might get out of reach of the crowd.

"I think I never felt so lonely in my life," he said to himself. "The very gaiety of the place depresses me." Then he lifted his head and paused.

Coming towards him, with downcast eyes and slow and listless steps, was a lady, whose form and carriage seemed familiar.

"Surely——" he said, half aloud.

The next moment she raised her head, and their eyes met.

His heart gave a great bound, and then almost stopped, for it was clear she did not recognise him. In the more than four years that had passed since last they met, she had scarcely changed at all—a little paler and thinner, with a care-worn look about the eyes that later years had brought, but otherwise she was the Claire of old, still beautiful as a dream. But with him the change in appearance was great; a thick brown beard completely hid the lower part of his face, and made him look, at least, ten years older.

He saw she would have passed him without recognition, so he stopped in front of her. "Claire," he said, "have you forgotten me?"

In a moment the blood rushed to her face and her eyes filled; for his voice, like the bells of London, would never change.

"Oh! Eric," she said, and their hands clasped in a long and silent embrace.

"You are pleased to see me, Claire?" he questioned, after a pause.

"Yes, Eric, and no! You make me think of home, and all that is lost."

"You call it *home* still?" he said at length.

"I can think of no other," she answered. "Though, truly, I have no home now."

"You should not have left Lindon, Claire. It was never the Major's wish."

"I wanted to be free—to be independent. And I had no claim upon you. Oh! Eric, I am so glad you are lord of Lindon."

"Lindon is nothing to me without you, Claire. Cannot you take back the words you spoke when last we met?"

"Oh! Eric, is it possible you can care for me still?" she said, with downcast eyes.

"I have never ceased to care for you," he answered. "I shall never care for another. It is true I tried to put you out of my heart when I supposed you were the wife of Mr. Quayle, and I made no attempt to find you. But——"

"You discovered I could never be his wife?"

"I did, Claire. I think I have found out all the truth."

"I am glad of that." And then she trembled so visibly that he led her to a seat in the shadow of a tree, and sat down by her side.

"I was very blind," she said after a pause. "and very bigoted. Like the Pharisee, of old, I put ritual before religion, and creed before correctness of life. Oh! Eric, I must have wounded you sorely."

"Let us forget all that has been painful in the past, and remember only the pleasant," he said.

"We can never wholly forget," she said, "and it is well sometimes that memory should chasten us."

"Perhaps you are right, Claire," he answered, with a far-away look in his eyes; "but just now let us think of the future. I have been seeking you for weeks, and now that I have found you will you send me away as you sent me before? You know how I have loved you. Oh! Claire, my life—cannot you love me a little?"

"You know I love you, Eric," she said, lifting her swimming eyes to his. "I have always loved you. And yet I

could hide for very shame that I promised to be the wife of one not worthy to unloose your shoes. But, oh! Eric, it seemed right to me. I thought it must be right. Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you, darling? Had you wounded me a million times more than you have done I could still forgive you."

"You were always generous," she said, smiling through her tears.

"And will you take me just as I am?"

"If you wish it, Eric."

"Wish it? Oh! Claire." And then—for there was no one near—their lips met in one pure kiss of love.

It was harvest time when Eric and his bride reached Priory Mere, and as they drove through the village all the people turned out to greet them, while the old church tower seemed almost to reel, so wild and joyous was the crash of bells. Philip Hardman and his wife were in the old home to greet them, the latter looking bonnier and happier than Eric had ever seen her.

"God bless you, my child," Hardman said to Claire, when she came blushing and smiling into the house, and he took her lovely face between his hands and kissed her.

"Oh! Uncle Philip, it was good of you to come down to give us a welcome," she said. "And has not Eric made the dear old place look splendid?"

"Splendid!" he said, his face beaming. "Why, it's nicer than the Hall."

"A thousand times," she answered, with loving eyes. "Eric is good. Don't you think so?"

"He's one in a thousand, my child. I tried to spoil him, but God has made all things work together for good. I kept him in darkness, but God has led him, and me also, into Light and Liberty."

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